

Summer 8-1-2021

Different Class: The Creation of the Premier League and the Commercialization of English Football

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by

Colin Damms

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

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August 2021

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2021

Published by the Graduate School



ABSTRACT

This project examines how English football evolved from a culture of hooliganism and poor upkeep into a popular and enterprising industry across the globe. The Premier League and its stars marketed the English game and its culture worldwide. Since the 1990s England has established itself as the leading club footballing nation. I argue that through football, and the culture and economics behind it, we can see the ways in which England attempted to change its image in the modern world. In the 1980s and 1990s Britain was confronted with its own established culture of violence, bigotry, and nationalist pride, particularly the sport of football. English football clubs and the English Football Association (FA) adapted in an effort to change their image and create a more accessible and marketable product. This study examines those changes and the ways in which they impacted the league, clubs, and fan culture in footballing communities. With a limited and economics-focused historiography on the subject, this work will contribute to the discussion by exploring a cultural perspective and examining the changes and economic impact from club and fan levels. It will also place this evolution within a broader European cultural context.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would have been impossible without the advice and support of my committee members, Dr. Kevin Greene, Dr. Brian LaPierre, and especially Dr. Allison Abra, my advisor and committee chair. I would also like to thank Dr. Kyle Zelner and Dr. Heather Stur for their support as I adjusted to working as a graduate student. Their mentorship was crucial to my growth as a professional, and reaffirmed that my decision to enroll in this program was the correct one. The guidance that my professors have given me throughout graduate school and the writing process has made my progress on this thesis possible, and I am grateful for the work they have put into this program for my fellow students and I.

I would also like to extend thanks to all of my family and friends, a group that continues to grow. I want to especially thank my mother and father, Jennifer and Richard, and sisters, Rachael and Kelsey, who have been a constant support system for me throughout my life. To my friends Adam, Keith, Matthew, Philip and Robert, thank you for your years of support and brotherhood, and to all my new friends here in Hattiesburg, I couldn't have done this without you either. I also want to thank my cohort in the History Graduate program. I especially want to thank Lucas, Hayley, and Sean, who have never hesitated to lend a hand or share from their grad school experience. And last, but not least, I want to thank Cody and Lindsey. I have trouble believing I am lucky enough to have experienced this process with friends as thoughtful and devoted as you.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my Grandad, Michael Damms. He lived his life with passion and humor for those he loved, and instilled in my father and myself a love for the beautiful game. I also want to dedicate this to my friend, Philip. Through all that he endures, he is relentless in determination and action to be the person that he wants to be for those that mean the most to him. He continues to inspire me, and I am so thankful for his friendship.

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LIST OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<i>EFL</i>	English Football League
<i>FA</i>	English Football Association
<i>FIFA</i>	Federation Internationale de Football Association
<i>UEFA</i>	Union of European Football Associations

CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

On May 13, 2012, the final day of the 2011/12 Premier League season, Manchester United and Manchester City went into their final respective games level on points at the top of the league table. Manchester City were battling their local rivals for the league title for the first time since 1968, and both Manchester clubs left their London rivals Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspurs, and Chelsea well in the dust, the closest of them finishing nineteen points behind. Though the matches started at the same time, Manchester United's 1-0 victory over Sunderland finished a few minutes ahead of their cross-town rivals, who at the time were down 1-2 to Queen's Park Rangers with five minutes of stoppage time to play. If the results held, United would be champions, but if City could mount a late comeback and win, their goal difference would give them the edge in the final league table. The Citizens had struggled to build themselves up to the level of their much more successful neighbors, but after a financial takeover in 2008 they began spending like champions on marquee players to put themselves on the cusp of history.

In the first minute of stoppage time, Bosnian striker Edin Dzeko scored an equalizer for City. Immediately the mood shifted in the stadium, and suddenly City's dominance late in the game felt vindicated as their efforts materialized on the scoreboard. The season was not yet lost. QPR were well in their own goal area defending, and looked like it was only a matter of time before they conceded. Right on cue, with seconds remaining, Mario Balotelli exchanged passes with Sergio Aguero, who then darted into the area and smashed the ball past QPR's helpless goalkeeper, winning Manchester City

their first league title in forty-four years. It was a league title four years and over £1 billion in the making for City's new owners, and they were just getting started.¹

Just moments after United's match ended they believed they were champions, and now the giants of the English game were left speechless, forced to witness the beginning of the end of their dynasty via mobile phone updates. "I swear you'll never see anything like this ever again!," cried match commentator Martin Tyler, who'd been working match coverage for nearly as many years. "So watch it, drink it in... Two goals in added time for Manchester City to snatch the title away from Manchester United!"² Over on another channel, commentator Peter Drury voiced similar amazement. "He's won the league with 90 seconds of stoppage time to play! Where does football go from here?"³ The Premier League, now broadcast globally, marketed as "The Greatest Show on Earth," had delivered.

The sports world was gasping for breath in its reaction, and even in the United States, where soccer fever has taken its time to develop, the event was a hot topic. For late night host Seth Meyers the game was reminiscent of the Boston Red Sox defeating the New York Yankees and breaking the curse of the Bambino.⁴ City played the role of plucky underdogs who finally turned it around to beat their dynastic rivals. It was truly a

¹ David Goldblatt, *The Game of our Lives: The English Premier League and the Making of Modern Britain*. (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2014), 173-174.

² Martin Tyler, "Manchester City vs. Queens Park Rangers." Sky Sports, Manchester, England: BSkyB, May 13, 2012.

³ Peter Drury, "Manchester City vs. Queens Park Rangers." ITV, Manchester, England: ITV, May 13, 2012.

⁴ Meyers, Seth. Twitter Post. May 13, 2012, 11:00 AM.
<https://twitter.com/sethmeyers/status/201703359428820994>

remarkable turnaround for City, who only a decade earlier were fighting for promotion to the Premier League. But were City truly underdogs?

The 2008 takeover of Manchester City by Sheikh Mansour and the Abu Dhabi United Group for Development and Investment introduced state wealth investment, forever changing the fortunes of the club and football.⁵ Within two seasons they were attracting top up-and-coming talents in the transfer market, offering high wages to compete with traditionally successful clubs such as Manchester United and Arsenal. By 2012 Manchester City had won the FA Cup and Premier League respectively in successive seasons, cementing themselves as a competitor in English Football.⁶ The power of investment was undeniably the driving force behind City's arrival as a Premier League power, and was indicative of how the sport had evolved in recent years. Soon after City's Emirati takeover, members of the Qatari royal family purchased French club Paris Saint-Germain. In 2003 Russian Oligarch and Vladimir Putin ally Roman Abramovich successfully purchased Chelsea Football Club. An age of new money had well and truly begun, and was turning up results for the clubs in question. Significantly, many of the Premier League's newest investors were not British, indicating the new wide reach of English football. Football attracted money for a multitude of reasons, and the Premier League was at the forefront of a movement that made revenue focused management the standard in football. It set the standard for lucrative television deals, attracted the biggest stars in the game with high wages, and sent multiple star-studded teams into Europe's premier tournament, the UEFA Champions League.

⁵ "Manchester City: Timeline of a transformation since 2008 Sheikh Mansour takeover." BBC, August 31, 2018.

⁶ Goldblatt, *The Game of our Lives*, 175.

Any Manchester United loss was rare enough in the Premier League era, but getting outdone by their local rival was a very new experience for the Red Devil faithful. Manchester United won thirteen Premier League titles in the twenty seasons after the inception of the Premier League in the spring of 1992. Manager Sir Alex Ferguson took charge in 1986 and rarely looked back over his twenty-six year career with the club, returning the club to familiar heights as one of the best football sides in the world. Not only this, the era of dominance that Ferguson oversaw made Manchester United the most valuable sports franchise in the world in 2012, valued at nearly \$2.235 billion by Forbes.⁷

Only three clubs in England truly challenged Ferguson's sporting genius and powerhouse club. The first, Arsenal, was another traditional power of the game which grew into the Premier League era with grace and style. Their bold decision to bring in French manager Arsene Wenger in 1996 led to a cultural and tactical evolution of the club, and their success reinforced the arrival of foreign players, managers, and styles to the English game. The other two clubs to challenge Ferguson's United teams were the aforementioned Manchester City and Chelsea respectively. Both were historically mid-tier clubs whose fortunes were changed by an enormous injection of money from new, rich owners.⁸ For Chelsea it was Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, an oil and television mogul who aided tremendously in Vladimir Putin's arrival in Russian politics. For Manchester City it was Sheikh Mansour, a member of the royal family of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates. Each spent heavily on transfers with the intent to build title winning sides as soon as possible. The fortunes of both clubs

⁷ "Manchester United still the world's richest football club." *BBC News*, April 19, 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/17769654> (November 17, 2020)

⁸ Goldblatt, *The Game of our Lives*, 85.

were changed overnight by these owners, and they were not alone. Premier League football attracted a lot of foreign investment, and the reason why was the level of popularity, profit, and opportunity that it offered its clubs was a level unmatched in any other league.

Money became the primary driver of modern professional sports in the late twentieth century, and football was no exception. However, unlike American professional sports, money was not regulated the same way in England, and before the 1990s expanding profit was not a driving motivation for most teams. The sport was by no means young, but the culture of it was not at the exposure level that it has since developed. Football clubs did what they needed to stay afloat financially, remaining competitive as best they could within those parameters. Most clubs were majority fan owned, with perhaps one to a few wealthy businessmen acting as major financial backers. In order to maintain the stadium experience and match-day revenue, very few games were televised for much of the 20th century.⁹ However, the upkeep of English football by the 1980s demonstrated to club owners and executives that old methods of club management were unsustainable. Even the best clubs had trouble maintaining stadiums and quelling fan violence, and English football's reputation soured quickly in the mid-1980s. A violent incident started by Liverpool fans at the 1985 European Cup final at Heysel stadium in Brussels, Belgium led to the ban of all English clubs from participating in European competitions for at least six seasons.¹⁰ In a human stampede thirty-nine people were

⁹ Jonathan Clegg and Joshua Robinson, *The Club: How the English Premier League Became the Wildest, Richest, Most Disruptive Force in Sports*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2018), 59-60.

¹⁰ "English Clubs Bid To Lift Bans," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, June 26, 1985.

killed, and hundreds more were left injured. The European Cup, rebranded as the UEFA Champions League in 1992, was the most sought after prize in club football, and a competition English clubs had done quite well in for previous decades. Manchester United were the first English side to lift the cup in 1968, and from the years 1977-1984 English clubs Liverpool (four times), Nottingham Forest (two times), and Aston Villa (once) won the competition a combined seven times. Despite a historically poor period for the English national team at that time, the clubs were taking over the world nearly every year.¹¹ The ban by UEFA ended that reign, and by the time English clubs re-entered the competition they were undergoing seismic structural and cultural changes.

The foundation of the English Premier League was a pivotal moment in the sport. The owners and chairmen of the most successful clubs in the country decided to take it upon themselves to reform the top flight of the English league system, and through the financial backing of satellite television, an alliance with the BBC, and approval from the English FA and players union they successfully broke away from the English Football League in 1992. They created a league that was designed for profit, expansion of television revenue, and importantly club governance. Inspired by the National Football League in the United States, the Premier League based its governance and business model on the ideals of profitability and club control without many barriers of accountability. The sport was forever changed in England, and though the football product increased in quality, a number of issues within the game and its communities became exposed by the spotlight.

¹¹ “UEFA Champions League: Champions League Winners,” *TransferMarkt*, <https://www.transfermarkt.com/uefa-champions-league/erfolge/pokalwettbewerb/CL> (November 19, 2020)

Football became one of England's most celebrated national pastimes. England was the birthplace of organized structure in the sport, and became the precedent for the growth of the game in the nineteenth century to what it became as a global phenomenon. The pride associated with this was complicated but undying, and the importance of the Premier League in English culture was reflective of that. The Premier League was the catalyst for English football's revival at the club level after the dark decade of the 1980s, and brought an unprecedented level of talent to England's shores. The economics behind the league were crucial, but posed a danger of leaving behind what made the sport special. At the heart of this topic is a power struggle between these communities and the club owners that took control of their clubs. Football supporters and the communities behind players, clubs, and national teams generated a passion that fueled the game to global conquest, and though globalization came with further complications it remained impossible for the consumer to be ignored. Despite this, power undeniably shifted away from the community and toward the wealthy individual owners of clubs, many of whom were increasingly disconnected from the communities of their clubs. The football communities are an undeniably important part of England, let alone English football, and all of the baggage that came with that societal connection was inherently intertwined with the sport. Their significance within the game could not be forgotten, but whether or not they had agency within their club became an important factor in their conditional support.

In this thesis I will argue that through commercialization and the formation of the Premier League, English football transformed economically and culturally in unprecedented ways. Clubs attracted the best talent in football with higher wages and elite managers, and played attractive hybrid football that blended English styles with

other philosophies, concepts, tactics from around the world. The embarrassment of Heysel paired with the tragedy of the Hillsborough Disaster in 1989 created a moment of opportunity in English football, which England's biggest clubs took by agreeing to break away from the Football League and form the new Premier league in 1992. The result was a monumental, and especially profitable sporting venture that gave English clubs unprecedented financial power through the introduction of television revenue. Commercialization led revenue focused club and league management to become the norm in the game of football, and this thesis will examine the ways in which the English game was impacted by this shift. In addition to the economic effects of the Premier League, I will study the ways in which the culture, management, and the football itself were impacted at fan and club levels. Significantly the conditions of commercialization and the expenses associated with it gave greater value to making football accessible. Racism and fan violence had to be addressed for the sake of social and financial safety, which brought England's long history of racism and xenophobia to the surface of governance in the sport. The expense of club management in this era also led clubs to turn to wealthy individuals and investment groups, which in turn established greater control over clubs independent from the input of supporters. These changes underlined the significant reach of football culture in England, and how it reflected English society as a whole.

Literature Review

English and European football has been a source of interest to economists, sociologists, and historians. One of the most important football historians to this thesis is Jonathan Wilson. Though Wilson is not a professional academic, he is well respected as a

historian of football, and has made major contributions to English football historiography in recent years, particularly in his ability to tie culture to the game itself. His most popular work *Inverting the Pyramid* is a thorough history of football tactics and the ways in which philosophies of the game spread across the world, taking on new and unique identities within specific cultural groups, nations, and clubs. This book provides thorough historical context to the development of the modern European game, and the multiple pan-European methods that have made their way into the English game.¹² Though the book was not as relevant to my study of English football as it would be to a wider study, it was helpful in providing frameworks for viewing the interaction of cultures and ideas across borders.

Wilson's *Anatomy of Manchester United* book was useful to this thesis as well. The book is disjointed in terms of historical focus, choosing to address certain periods of club history by focusing on specific matches and the context surrounding them. However, it offers relevant content through its focus on club issues in the 1980s, 1990s, and twenty-first century, and its creative writing style and use of sources.¹³ The book provides primary sources for chapter four on Manchester United, and offers insight on the club's commercial and cultural transformation in the 1990s and 2000s and the most recent developments since the Glazer family takeover of the club. Though their tenure was anything but easy-going, football writers were quick to point out the stability and laid back approach provided by the Glazer leadership. This massively underestimated the

¹² Wilson, Jonathan. *Inverting the Pyramid: The History of Football Tactics*, (Orion Publishing Group: London, Limited), 2018.

¹³ Jonathan Wilson, *The Anatomy of Manchester United: A History in Ten Matches*, (Orion Publishing Group: London, 2017),

inconsistency that followed on the pitch as well as the inadequate performance of their Chief Executive Ed Woodward drew a lot of criticism.¹⁴

Another important work of Wilson's to this project is *The Barcelona Inheritance*, a book which frames FC Barcelona's modern history as an almost familial history. Wilson argues that though the club has had many separate periods of success, it is unique for its devotion to a tradition and philosophy that has become almost synonymous with the club itself and Catalan culture. Tactically managers have changed a bit, but there is always a focus on the system installed by Johann Cruyff. Cruyff was a star player of AFC Ajax in Amsterdam and the Dutch national team in the 1960s and 1970s before moving to Barcelona as a player in 1973.¹⁵ He left in 1978, but returned in 1988 as a manager, and installed his Dutch tiki-taka system. In addition to his tactical prowess, Cruyff focused on building up La Masia, Barcelona's youth academy, by identifying and developing talent early. This academy produced many successful players, including Xavi Hernandez, Andres Iniesta, and Lionel Messi, the latter of whom is regarded as one of the greatest players of all time.¹⁶ This modern history is not unlike that of English club Manchester United, whose greatest period of success has also happened from the 1990s to the early 2010s, and whose club structure and culture value philosophy, tradition, and style. Both commercialization and success have complicated these values, something

¹⁴ Simon Edmonds, "Manchester United: Arguments For and Against the Glazers," *Bleacher Report*, September 6, 2012. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1324651-manchester-united-arguments-for-and-against-the-glazers-at-man-utd> (September 1, 2020)

¹⁵ Jonathan Wilson, *The Barcelona Inheritance: The Evolution of Winning Soccer Tactics from Cruyff to Guardiola*, (PublicAffairs: New York, 2018), 22-23.

¹⁶ Wilson, *The Barcelona Inheritance*. 58.

which Wilson's perspective covers well, having witnessed much of the game's modern developments in his career as a journalist.¹⁷

Wilson's club case study in *The Barcelona Inheritance* is a useful study of a specific club and its fan culture over an extended period in the modern era of the sport. Manchester United is similar to Barcelona in terms of history, success, and following, and established a particular significance to the English game as well as world football. My work is similar to Wilson's in that I try to approach this history of the Premier League with an understanding of the culture of the game in mind. The significance of football did not rest solely in its economic value, even as commercialization drastically increased the economy of the sport. The sport existed for over one hundred years in England before television money injected a fortune of cash into the game, and though money became a necessity the clubs and players still rely on supporters and football communities for patronage and sustainability.

The undeniable influence of money in the Premier League era made economics a necessary area of scholarship to incorporate into this project, and there was significant work done by economists in the area which guided my research. Economist Stefan Szymanski took specific focus on the growth of commercialization and investment in the sport over the past few decades. The influence of television money behind this shift towards commercially driven management and the competitive ramifications of the money-driven game are both compelling narratives in this thesis as well. Szymanski identified a social hierarchy in the game, which was not absent from the discourse before

¹⁷ Wilson, *The Anatomy of Manchester United*, xiii.

the era of big-money, but was dramatically flipped on its head in the 1990s and 2000s. Largely unrestricted investment into clubs allowed both the consolidation of power by certain traditionally successful clubs and the rise of new powerhouses funded by oligarch billionaires and, in some cases, state investment groups representing royal families. Books like *Money and Soccer* and *Soccernomics* demonstrate Szymanski's work on the role of finances in modern football in general, and were hugely influential to this thesis.

Jonathan Clegg and Joshua Robinson's *The Club* was another major contributor to the history of the Premier League from an economic perspective. The book offered a narrative of the financial developments in English football, unpacking the history behind the dramatic structural transformations that took place in the early 1990s, the conditions and tragedies in English football that led to such transformations, and the impact of foreign and domestic investment into the English top flight. The scholarship on this subject emphasized Heysel and Hillsborough as primary influences of change in England, which led to the formation of the Premier League. Clegg and Robinson in particular gave significance to this period of change as a tremendous economic opportunity for the top English clubs, which they showed were looking for avenues of modernization and revenue growth for some time.¹⁸ Their work is an excellent blueprint for studying the Premier League, but is heavily economics focused. They emphasized the influence of figures like Rupert Murdoch, one of many financial moguls to profit from the easing of government restrictions under Margaret Thatcher, was identified for his role, with his company BSkyB, in deciding to gamble on television rights to the young but promising

¹⁸ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*, 74.

Premier League.¹⁹ The revision of the English top flight from the First Division to the Premier League was conceived by the executives of the most historically successful clubs in England, but led by Manchester United and Arsenal Executives, Martin Edwards and David Dein respectively.²⁰ *The Club* also demonstrated the dramatic way in which money impacted football discourse. This aspect of the game is crucial to its modern developments, and I argue it is the turn that made the Premier League such an attractive product to domestic and foreign managers, players, audiences, and financiers. The Premier League drew some of the largest worldwide television audiences in the history of sport, and its profit-driven approach from day 1 helped to expand its audience, attract the best talents with higher wages than almost all continental leagues, and drive foreign investment in its clubs by billionaires from all over the globe.²¹ Clegg and Robinson, both regular contributors to *The Wall Street Journal*, have a clear background in economics, and an even clearer interest in the economics of the sport rather than the culture. Though this thesis focuses heavily on cultural developments in the history of the Premier League, the economic perspective and analysis of economic scholars are necessary to this project for their telling of the history and translation of economic discourse.

Football's profitability was a driving motivation behind a number of changes to the league, partially spearheaded by club officials and owners, and was successful in changing fortunes in English Football both financially and competitively. However, there is not necessarily a direct correlation between profitability and success, something that

¹⁹ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*, 31.

²⁰ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*, 74-75.

²¹ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*, 236.

became far more noticeable as the commercialization of the game continued, nor was there any longer a distinction between the two, as was believed to be the case for years before the creation of the Premier League.²²

The issue of racism in football is particularly important to the arguments of this thesis as well. Racism in English football was significant not only for its effect on fan culture, but for the relationship between fans and players as football became an area of society in which racism was actively combated. As questions of football governance came into the spotlight, so too did the issue of racism, efforts to fight racism, and the ways in which agents of the game participated in those efforts. Football was a cultural arena in which England was firmly in the spotlight because of the international reach of the Premier League and the diverse star personalities that it attracts from around the world. Scholars like Emy Onuora and Brett Bebbber showed how in the closing decades of the twentieth century England was confronted with its own culture of violence, bigotry, and nationalism in society and the sport of football, and that football culture became a vessel for anti-racist activism.²³ Significantly the works of both of these scholars leads directly into the Premier League era in question in this thesis.²⁴ The government, the FA, the clubs, and even the players themselves acted against racism to varying degrees of success in order to change the image and create a more accessible footballing product.

Works such as Laurent Dubois' *Soccer Empire* and *The Changing Face of Football* by Les Back, Tim Crabbe, and John Solomos also gave greater context to a

²² Stefan Szymanski, "Why is Manchester United so Successful?" *Business Strategy Review*. 47.

²³ Onuora, Emy, *Pitch Black*, (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2015), 23.

²⁴ Bebbber, Brett, *Violence and Racism in Football*, (London: Pickering & Chatto Limited, 2012), 190.

complex history of racism, postcolonialism, and national identity in European football. Dubois, a historian of the French Empire, contributed to the historical scholarship in modern football by analyzing the strong, and often tense relationship between the French national team stars and French nationalism in politics and the press.²⁵ As the French team began to more and more visibly resemble the diversity of France, so too did it endure the unwanted attention of the National Front and racism and islamophobia. This work offers an important parallel to my own study of the way black and foreign players dealt with abuse and criticism in England, as well as using the English press as a source for measuring public discourse. Dubois studied players whose experiences were unique to France and the French public, but his discussion of the sport in regards to the legacy of imperialism and the ties between the sport and political activism are both relevant in England as well.

Back, Crabbe, and Solomos similarly addressed issues of national identity, race, and football culture, but this sociological work examines cases within the English game.²⁶ Sources included fan articles, newspaper coverage, club songs, and official policy on racism and hate speech at football grounds.²⁷ Football was almost exclusively a white-male dominated spectacle in Britain for much of the 20th century, and as the sport evolved attempts were made to make the environment safer for other demographics and families. The issues of identity and expression within public rituals is crucial to the cultural aspect of this project, and this book and other sociological studies are a useful

²⁵ Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 14.

²⁶ Les Back, Tim Crabbe, and Jon Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football: Racism, Identity, and Multiculture in the English Game*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001)

²⁷ Back, Crabbe, and Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football*, 289.

source of data on the social arena of football. These works include surveys and statistics on racism and abuse, as well as accounts of player and fan experiences. For a topic with a young historiography, sociological literature was particularly helpful in establishing links between the culture of the game and broader social issues.

Sources

The sources utilized in this thesis vary greatly, from government legislation to match commentary, but a significant and repeated source was press reports. The common saying “journalism is the first rough draft of history” is especially applicable to sport, and its meticulous documentation was immensely helpful in the assembly of the history of the Premier League and editing of timelines. Crucially, reports also helped to offer insight into the sport and major events. This was particularly useful, especially in pieces that reflected on events some time after the fact. Some of these reports usefully feature supporter-written opinions and blog posts. These primary sources and the secondary source literature make up most of the sourcebook for the project.

In addition to analysis of supporters and the press, there is a specific section of source analysis of films produced by or in association with Manchester United. I use these films to critically unpack the club’s conscious construction of club identity and history. Though the films in question could be used as secondary sources, documentary creations after the fact of the history in question, I mostly utilize them as products of the extended period of time in question. For example, the *Class of 92* documentary film produced in 2013, tells the story of Manchester United’s most successful group of academy graduates, including star talents Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes, and David

Beckham.²⁸ The film featured a number of key interviews, including former Prime Minister Tony Blair, as well as a clear expression of the club values that molded Manchester United's era of success. The presentation of this documentary, I argue, serves as a useful source for understanding how the club consciously embraced a certain image of its history and culture. The club bought into a positive, almost mythical reputation of itself that persisted in that time period, and utilized multiple forms of media to perpetuate said reputation as an iconic and constant power in the English game. In addition to nation-wide and European-wide dominance, the films demonstrate how significant the production of local talent is to the club identity. The films are conscious of a "never say die" mentality that became synonymous with the club. It is clear that Manchester United view their history of comeback wins in big games, late title races, and dramatic cup runs as emblematic of their identity.²⁹ This image was pushed often as well, symbolically linking itself to its history as a working class club, and even the club's recovery after the tragic Munich Air Disaster claimed the lives of many club officials and first team players.

Chapter Structure

In the first chapter I explore the establishment of the Premier League, the economic changes in English league football behind the move, and the revival of English clubs as a competitive force in European football as a whole. One of these major economic changes was the introduction of television broadcasting. Prior to 1990 it was highly irregular for professional football games to be televised live in England. Apart from major finals and perhaps the English national team, most audiences were generally

²⁸ Leo Pearlman, "The Class of 92." DVD. Directed by Ben and Gabe Turner. (London: F73 Productions, 2013).

²⁹ Pearlman, "The Class of 92."

limited to one live game, replays, and Match of the Day, an end of the day condensed highlights show on the BBC. This system was in place primarily to keep up the match-day revenue that came with offering an exclusively in-person experience to fans. In 1992 the clubs in the English First Division left and formed the Premier League, with the English FA's backing, and signed a lucrative TV contract with Rupert Murdoch's Sky Sports channel on BSkyB satellite television, removing English top flight club football from terrestrial television.³⁰ The deal was considered by economic historians to have been a high risk-reward move that paid off big for BSkyB, and it led to even more lucrative television deals domestically and internationally. I show how television revenue guaranteed Premier League expansion to overseas markets in the age of burgeoning mass communication. This expansion helped to boost popularity of English football, clubs, and players and increased club revenue to unprecedented heights.

The increase in wealth within the game also persuaded more and more wealthy individuals to bankroll team expenses as the majority owner, funding higher player transfers and wages as the market continued to inflate. However, the increase in the Premier League's wealth also created an immense wealth gap in the English football league pyramid, meaning there was more financial risk for clubs that were relegated from the Premier League. There was also a more difficult path for promotion to the Premier League for clubs in lower divisions. As was the case for Leeds United, the financial stress of staying competitive at a Premier League level was too great for some clubs. Entering

³⁰ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*, 414-415.

administration and declaring bankruptcy led to points deductions and penalties for some clubs, exacerbating dire situations that sent some clubs to the brink of dissolution.

Chapter two unpacks the issue of racism and xenophobia in English football, which had an ugly reputation for fan violence, hooliganism, and white nationalism in the twentieth century. This fostered a sour relationship between fans, players, and authority in the game such as the government, the police, and even the clubs themselves. It became clear that to reform the sport in Britain there would also need to be a reformation of the spectator, something which is expressed by players themselves and members of the press. While in the first chapter these reforms were more legal and structural, the second chapter explores cultural changes in football communities. Some players took matters into their own hands, kicking out against racism and xenophobia in both literal and figurative cases, and participating in anti-racism activism and campaigns. The arrival of foreign players and managers meant that the English game was more diverse than ever before. I argue that these changes were an integral part of English club football's competitive revival in the 1990s and 2000s, and that efforts at social reform to combat fan violence and racism were heavily motivated by the need to make the sport more accessible to the league's increasingly diverse players, managers, and audience. Although the government enacted policy to combat hooliganism, this chapter shows the influence of activism in the sport by anti-racist organizations, supporters, and footballers, as well as the effects of multiculturalism and expanded diversity in the Premier League.

While these efforts and increased regulation of fan culture did quell fan violence, and created a more accessible and safe football culture and stadium environment, there were also complications with the relationship between fans and authority. With greater

investment into teams came the necessity of wealthy backers, and the interest of wealthy owners did not often call for greater power to supporters' trust and minority fan ownership. Wealthy owners consolidated their power by conducting forceful buyouts of minority shareholders, and the landscape of football communities has been reshaped by the necessity of money and investment. The importance of wealth led to a shift from fan-focused styles of ownership, which created a cultural crisis among fan groups. There became a greater concern about the influence that supporters had in the football economy as owners acted individually and took power away from fan ownership groups. This development played out in various ways that are relevant to the final chapter concerning ownership changeover in the Premier League era, and specifically the effects of such changeover at the behemoth football club and global brand that is Manchester United Football Club.

The final chapter shifts the focus of the study to the club level, examining the effects of commercialization at a top flight English club. It was in fact clubs that led the formation of the Premier League, and the richest clubs at that. For this reason I will examine the Premier League's clubs in general, but focus on Manchester United in particular. Manchester United were the most successful English top flight team of all time, and one of the biggest sports franchises in the world. With an estimated 659 million supporters worldwide from a study conducted in 2012, their global appeal paired well with their history as a pioneering club in English football before and after the creation of the Premier League.³¹ The most successful era in the club's history occurred in the 1990s

³¹ Ed Prior, "Do Manchester United really have 659m supporters?" *BBC News*, February 18, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21478857> (November 6, 2020)

and 2000s under the leadership of Sir Alex Ferguson. The club built strong teams year after year by utilizing their financial power and appeal in the transfer market to attract stars from all over the world. Adding to their success and legacy was their world class football academy, which developed some of the best youth talent into star professional players. Among these talents was David Beckham, a generational English talent who became one of the most recognizable celebrities in the world. He was a member of the “Class of 92,” which featured 5 other United academy products that helped form the backbone of the squad for decades, and played a hybrid style of English football that allowed for more individual creative expression that became synonymous with the club and culture.³²

As the Premier League marketed itself as the greatest show on earth to a global television audience, Manchester United’s sustained success and stardom made them a must-watch team. Though clubs like Arsenal and Chelsea achieved periods of success, United remained a constant in the English game, winning the league title 13 times in the first 20 years of the Premier League. However, after the retirement of Sir Alex Ferguson the club’s performances drastically dipped, and the incompetence of the executives in team management under the Glazer ownership became much more apparent. For this reason the club is an excellent case study with a multi-layered modern history and sustained relevance in the age of big money. They were a club with undeniable financial and historical credibility, but also a club which was limited in many ways as it attempted to form a new identity post-Sir Alex Ferguson. Manchester United became a global entity

³² Pearlman, “The Class of 92.”

as well as a football team, and capitalized on its historic success to much economic gain, even as performances dipped. This brought positive and negative consequences, as the club was able to cement itself at the highest level and maintain its high level of talent, but at the same time complicated its cultural fabric and legacy. Fallout of club corporatization even alienated some of United's fans, a section of support which broke away and formed a new football club entirely. I explore the impact of commercialization in football culture at the fan and player levels, and examine the implications of commercialization inside and outside of football grounds. Dramatic economic changes had a widespread impact on the culture of the game as well as the game itself. Manchester United grew with their success, cemented themselves as an iconic representation of their culture and maintained an important relationship with their community and fans. I argue the Glazers takeover upset that balance between the club and the local community, and that through protest fans tried to maintain influence in a market they had increasingly less control over. The fan culture in England experienced a re-working similar to the scale of the economics, and with similar motivations as well.

Like much of British society, class was enormously influential in the development of clubs in the early days of the organized game. Manchester United was founded by workers of the Lancashire-Yorkshire Railway workers' union in the late 19th century, and maintained a strong tie to labour culture in arguably the most influential city of the Industrial Revolution.³³ The takeover by American billionaire Malcolm Glazer in 2005 sparked protest from many local supporters, as well as debate amongst fans over the

³³ Wilson, "The Anatomy of Manchester United."

identity of the club and its connection, or lack thereof, to the people of Manchester. One section of supporters broke away from the club entirely to start a new club at the bottom of the English league system. Paired with the club's growth of support across the world, the modern era of commercial success was juxtaposed with an identity crisis among supporters who suddenly questioned whether the club was still the same one they'd supported for so long.

CHAPTER II – AN END IS A START: THE FORMATION OF THE PREMIER LEAGUE

There was a dramatic power shift in the institutional control of English football in the early 1990s. The English Football League's First Division had lost traction with clubs because of its restrictive measures and lack of entrepreneurship. For decades, the nation's top professional football clubs had been on a trajectory of strength and success in the game itself, but this did not reflect in the financial well-being of English clubs. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that many of England's biggest clubs, especially Manchester United and Arsenal, were conscious of this, and made efforts to maximize their revenue and to influence the governing structure of English football in order to create a new top flight division, the English Premier League. This shift among the clubs at the top of the game laid the groundwork for transformational restructuring of the English top flight and had a lasting impact on the sport as a whole. These changes and the people who pushed for them were aided by club commercialization and evolving understandings of the football economy and regulation, including the impact of severe and tragic stadium incidents. Football governance in England became more focused on economic growth and sustainability, and the result was a well-oiled, commercially driven football product.

The Premier League became one of the most followed sporting leagues in the world, and took over at an advantageous time in the rise of the digital age. Mass media, the internet, and international television broadcasting all aided the Premier League in becoming a sporting superpower. English football clubs were not always run in such a capitalistic way, but the structure of the English league system is quite reminiscent of a free market hierarchy. Unlike professional leagues in the United States, teams were not

guaranteed a spot in the league for the next season. Teams compete for a league position every year, and the teams that finish in the bottom three to four spots in every league division were relegated to the division below. At the top of the league table, the top three to four teams from the lower divisions below got promoted every season. The system is referred to as the Football Pyramid, and was the basic structure of league football throughout the world, with Major League Soccer in the United States being a notable exception.

The inception of the Premier League and its replacing of the old First Division did not dismantle the English Football Pyramid. There remains a promotion/relegation system, which maintains a strong link between the professional and semi-professional leagues. This link is crucial for keeping small-town football clubs alive, even if a path to the top is not easy. The sponsorship, partnership, and television deals that the reformation allowed for increased revenue for the leagues and clubs at an unprecedented rate. However, as I will explore in this chapter, the reformation led to a greater wealth gap between the Premier League and lower divisions, and created an enormous financial advantage for clubs that stay in the Premier League safely for an extended period of time. While the Premier League enhanced the financial stability of clubs at the top of the pyramid the wealth did not trickle down, and the drop off of relegation came with an even greater penalty that threatened the existence of some clubs. The clubs that benefited most from the system were the very same that led efforts for its creation, and the shift towards commercialism in the sport aided the consolidation of power by these clubs over England's top competitions and qualification spots for European tournaments.

The chapter will also demonstrate that although the Premier League era began because of financial motivations by club owners and executives, the situation that allowed for its creation was one of tragedy and social disorder. English football had a problem with hooliganism that boiled over in multiple ugly instances, attracting the attention of the British government. Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party in the 1980s were intent on addressing hooliganism, and incidents such as the Heysel Stadium Disaster in 1985 and the Hillsborough Disaster in 1989 furthered calls for reform in England's national pastime. Government interference prompted mixed reception, but created the opportunity that club executives desired to break away from the football league and create the Premier League.

The Heysel and Hillsborough Incidents and the Transformation of English Football

There are two key events that influenced a more economic and capitalistic approach to managing clubs and, eventually, the league as a whole. The first was the Heysel Stadium Disaster at the 1985 European Cup Final in Brussels, Belgium. Liverpool was the perennial champion of both England and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, and were set to play in yet another European Cup Final at the end of the 1984/85 season. Their opponents in the 1985 European Cup, Italian giants Juventus, were underdogs, expected to fall to yet another English champion. Before the match however, an altercation broke out between sets of Liverpool and Juventus fans.

The opposing fan sections were divided only by a small chain link fence and a thin line of Belgian police. Liverpool supporters, the instigators of the incident, began throwing flares, rocks, and chunks of concrete that littered the deteriorating stadium. Liverpool fans tore at the barriers as well, and eventually many of them broke through the

barrier and charged at the Juventus supporters.³⁴ A riot ensued, and many fans crushed each other against barriers as Liverpool supporters poured into the Juventus section. Many fans forced their way out of the stands entirely and onto the track surrounding the football pitch, but were met by Belgian police who were waiting to attack them. The assumption by authorities was that a pitch invasion was taking place, but a much more troubling and violent attack exploded. A portion of the Juventus stand collapsed, and as fans attempted to escape the chaos, many trampled or crushed each other. In total, there were thirty-nine Italian and Belgian fans killed with hundreds more injured because of the riot and collapse started by violent Liverpool supporters.³⁵

Police, stadium officials, and fans shared the blame for the disaster, but Liverpool supporters, and English fans in general, bore the most of the blame. In total, twenty-six Liverpool supporters faced charges for their role in starting the stadium riot.³⁶ The only extraditable charge that could be levelled against them was manslaughter, but additional charges of assault were added upon their arrival in Belgium. The court convicted fourteen fans of charges for manslaughter and assault, and handed down three-year sentences.³⁷ A handful of stadium officials were charged as well, and the poor upkeep of Heysel Stadium started a dialogue on the serious danger that crumbling stadium infrastructure posed to fans. Officials were well aware of the poor state of Heysel stadium, something accentuated by the chunks of concrete littering the stands of the stadium. These were

³⁴ Jamie Jackson, "Heysel: The Witnesses' Stories," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2005/apr/03/newsstory.sport> (October 14, 2020).

³⁵ Jackson, "Heysel: The Witnesses' Stories."

³⁶ "All 25 Liverpool Supporters Formally Charged in Connection with the Heysel Stadium Disaster," *Liverpool Echo*, September 10, 1987.

³⁷ Jackson, "Heysel: The Witnesses' Stories."

even used as projectiles by both sets of fans, and perhaps a symbol of the dramatic decay in the sport and culture both literally and figuratively.

Though Heysel did not happen in England, it was a full display of the problems in English football that absolutely had to be addressed in the immediate years after. The English government saw this, and noticed the inaction of the English FA and Football League in the wake of this disaster. The question of government intervention was raised, and later in 1985 Parliament voted for football fan-focused legislation, The Sporting Events Act of 1985, which limits the sale and consumption of alcohol in football stadiums. The act specifically addresses the consumption of alcohol within sight of the football pitch, and states the crime is even punishable with prison time, depending on the severity.³⁸ This is clear evidence of the concerns in England about football issues being a public safety issue. The consequences of the Heysel Disaster were deemed necessary by the Tory government especially, who through legislation demonstrated an eagerness to prevent and punish future incidents to greater effect. Despite the effects that the clubs knew would come, there was little doubt among directors and board members that English football needed a culture change.

There was an established reputation amongst English football fans for hooliganism dating back to the 1950s and 1960s.³⁹ Although there were no incidents to the scale of Heysel, many clubs, and even the English national team, were followed by football firms. Football firms were essentially gangs of supporters that provoked

³⁸ *Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol etc.) Act 1985*
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1985/57/contents> (November 5, 2020).

³⁹ Bebb, Brett, *Violence and Racism in Football*, (Pickering & Chatto Publishers: London, 2012). 14.

altercations with each other and the police or other stadium security/authority, all in the name of supporting their team. Teams across Europe were followed by firms, but the culture thrived in Britain in the second half of the 20th Century. Though some only sought to follow the club, others were used as vessels for neo-Nazi and far-right white nationalist demonstrations. By the 1980s the culture had gotten out of hand. Fighting inside and outside football grounds, stabbings and gang attacks, and even rioting were responsible for making football a public safety issue. Heysel was not the first major incident of hooliganism in 1985, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher set up a committee earlier that year for the purpose of combating hooliganism at football grounds.⁴⁰ A riot in London after a Luton Town vs. Millwall match the same year prompted the move by Thatcher, and this would not be the last time the government would have to get involved in the governance of the game.

Hooliganism from British supporters of English clubs was tolerated without significant action for some time, but the Heysel Disaster was also the last straw for UEFA, the governing body of European football. The organization passed down a five-year ban from European competitions to all English clubs, which remained in place until the 1990/91 season for the UEFA Cup and European Cup Winners' Cup, and 1991/92 for the European Cup.⁴¹ The European competitions ban seriously impacted the longterm

⁴⁰ "Conservative Governments and Football Regulation." *Urban75*.
<http://www.urban75.org/football/after3.html> (November 19, 2020).

⁴¹ Liverpool were league winners for the 1989/90 season, but did not participate in the 1990/91 European Cup due to an additional year added to their ban. Liverpool were the club who were deemed the perpetrators in the Heysel Disaster, and were prevented from being the first English team to compete in the competition again. Arsenal would compete the next season as defending league champions from the 1990/91 First Division. Aston Villa participated in the 1990/91 UEFA Cup, and Manchester United won the 1990/91 European Cup Winners' Cup, becoming the first English club to win a European competition post-Heysel.

competitiveness of English clubs in Europe. It would be several years before English teams would come close to replicating dominance in Europe that was on display nearly every season in the 1970s and 1980s. From 1990 it would be nearly a decade before Manchester United became the first English team to once again win the European Cup, rebranded as the UEFA Champions League in 1992.⁴²

The second of the key stadium disasters to transform the future of English football was the Hillsborough Disaster, a stadium collapse incident that occurred at an FA Cup Semi-Final match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest on April 15, 1989. The match took place at Sheffield Wednesday's Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, England, where an overcrowded standing section of the west stand collapsed. Over three thousand Liverpool fans were crowded into their designated section behind one of the goals. The listed safety capacity however was around two thousand, but should have been listed around one thousand-six hundred according to the Taylor Report.⁴³ South Yorkshire Police and even Liverpool goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar noticed fans packed tightly against the fenced barrier asking for help, but it was not until after the section collapse that it became clear to police that something had happened. Many people died of asphyxia before the stadium collapse had occurred because of the severe overcrowding that pushed the front rows of fans forward against the fence and barriers.⁴⁴ The stampede

⁴² "UEFA Champions League: Champions League Winners," *TransferMarkt*.
<https://www.transfermarkt.com/uefa-champions-league/erfolge/pokalwettbewerb/CL> (November 19, 2020).

⁴³ "How the Hillsborough Disaster Happened," *BBC News*, April 26, 2016,
<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-19545126#:~:text=Police%20errors%20caused%20a%20dangerous,the%20stadium%20contributed%20the%20disaster>. (October 28, 2020).

⁴⁴ Lord Justice Peter Taylor, "Lord Taylor's final report on the Hillsborough stadium disaster," London, 1989, 52.

that followed after the collapse caused even more deaths and injuries from crushing. Fans poured through holes in the fencing and barricades separating them from the pitch, and turned back to help those trapped and injured climb out of the pile however they could. Police stopped the match and allowed fans onto the pitch when the situation became clear, but by then much of the damage was done.

In the Hillsborough Disaster, ninety-six Liverpool fans died, prompting a thorough investigation by football and government authorities into the causes, both human and structural. The entire footballing community mourned the disaster and the pain football fans suffered because of the incompetence of the South Yorkshire Police and the misinformation campaign pushed by law enforcement and government officials which blamed Liverpool supporters for the incident.⁴⁵

Hillsborough sent shockwaves through English football, and justifiably became a cornerstone moment in the evolution of the sport in England. Economists Jonathan Clegg and Joshua Robinson describe the Hillsborough Disaster well in their history of the English Premier League, *The Club*. They write:

[Hillsborough] was more than the deadliest stadium catastrophe in British history. It was a calamity that has blighted the lives of thousands; led to more than two decades of smears, cover-ups, and outright lies by culpable authorities; and raised

⁴⁵ David Conn, “Duckenfield admitted trying to blame fans for Hillsborough, court told,” *The Guardian*, October 31, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/oct/31/duckenfield-admitted-trying-to-blame-fans-for-hillsborough-court-told>

a series of deeply troubling social, political, and economic questions. To this day, Britain is still grappling with the fallout.⁴⁶

Hillsborough impacted football in a number of ways, others of which will be discussed in the next chapter, but one immediate impact on the footballing economy was the demand for stadium restructuring. The Taylor Report, published in January, 1990 by Lord Justice Peter Taylor upon his investigation into the disaster, cited a number of safety hazards that played a role in the deaths and injuries at Hillsborough, including mismanagement by the South Yorkshire Police and stadium structural failure.⁴⁷

New safety measures passed by Parliament, the Football Licensing Authority, and even language from the Taylor Report began a stadium reformation era, and a transition into all-seating stadiums. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the British government took the opportunity to get involved where the FA did not, and passed sweeping legislation addressing problems of both Heysel and Hillsborough. Even before the Heysel disaster in 1985 there was debate in the House of Commons about quelling crowd violence, with an emphasis on protecting police officers. One Tory MP reported the Metropolitan Police alone had sustained 83 injuries during the 1984/85 season, with several requiring hospitalisation.⁴⁸ Parliament passed the Football Spectators Act later in 1989, which introduced a number of legislative measures, restrictions, and definitions in

⁴⁶ Jonathan Clegg and Joshua Robinson, *The Club: How the English Premier League Became the Wildest, Richest, Most Disruptive Force in Sports*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2018), 76.

⁴⁷ Taylor, 95.

⁴⁸ MP Giles-Shaw, "Football Hooliganism," Hansard, 66. Volume 76: debated on Thursday, March 28, 1985. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1985-03-28/debates/488e0a44-2eee-405a-b103-76a1141108b8/FootballHooliganism>

English football. “Violence” and “Disorder” at or around a football match became a criminal offense, which could result in a banning order and prison time, depending on the severity of the crime. The act also gave definition to “Disorder,” which included the use of threatening language, display of threatening language, or targeted hate against specific groups of people, and specifically outlined “racial hatred” as an offense.⁴⁹

Police were also given power to designate a crime as a “football related offence” if the crime occurred within twenty-four hours before or after a match, as long as there was sufficient evidence the perpetrator was associated with a football match or football gang.⁵⁰ Spectator violence was specifically defined as violence against “persons” or “property,” which turned some heads when it was enacted after Hillsborough, which was not an incident of fan violence.⁵¹ Police notably dodged responsibility for the disaster despite the conclusions of the Taylor report, and fed a misinformation campaign in the press. Tabloid paper *The Sun* ran a story claiming sensationalist and untrue allegations of hooliganism during the disaster. A large headline reading “The Truth,” was followed with outrageous allegations that claimed fans “picked pockets of the victims,” “urinated on the brave cops,” and “beat up PC giving kiss of life.”⁵² The feature, published just four days after the disaster, was later deemed false by an independent inquiry into Hillsborough, an inquiry which ruled the police and local government had worked extensively to cover up

⁴⁹ *Football Spectators Act of 1989*, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/37> (October 30, 2020).

⁵⁰ *Football Spectators Act of 1989*.

⁵¹ *Football Spectators Act of 1989*.

⁵² “The Truth,” *The Sun*, April 19, 1989, 1.

their wrongdoing in the disaster by encouraging a smear campaign against the victims and survivors to paint them as drunken hooligans.⁵³

Newspapers at the time seemed to understand the British government's involvement in the matter as a direct reflection of Thatcher's interest in Britain's image abroad, and not an interest in improving football. Her legacy in football is associated directly with the legacy of Hillsborough, and the ugly way in which she painted football fans. She was hesitant to show support to the Taylor report because of the blame it placed on police, and believed it could encourage more aggressive behavior from Liverpool fans towards authority.⁵⁴ *The Sunday Independent* described her push of the Spectators' Bill in 1989 as "duplicitous," implying her involvement in football was a noble but misguided attempt to combat a serious problem in the game.⁵⁵ Thatcher and Parliament's responses focused on the violence specifically, which showed an urgency to prevent further displays of public hooliganism. Concerns about cultural decay in football through hooliganism were, however, shared by administrators of the sport. Club chairmen at First Division clubs had long sought an excuse to reform stadiums and increase matchday revenue, and discussions had already taken place regarding sale of television rights as a way to fund stadium renovation.⁵⁶ Leaders in the top league of the sport took the situation

⁵³ Owen Gibson and David Conn, "New Hillsborough inquest likely after damning report," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2012/sep/12/hillsborough-disaster-inquest-prosecutions-report>

⁵⁴ Paddy Shennan, "Margaret Thatcher: Her role in the aftermath of the Hillsborough disaster," *The Liverpool Echo*, May 7, 2013. <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/margaret-thatcher-role-aftermath-hillsborough-3416839>

⁵⁵ "Thatcher's Folly," *The Sunday Independent*. November 5, 1989. 1.

⁵⁶ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*, 74-75.

seriously, and the FA, Football League, and clubs all complied with the change in governance.

For big, wealthy clubs like Manchester United and Arsenal, the news of new stadium regulations and upkeep measures was in a way quite welcome. Martin Edwards, the majority owner and club chairman of Manchester United, and David Dein, club chairman of Arsenal, wanted to run their respective clubs with more attention to business and free enterprise. To improve their product, they needed to create a safer, more enjoyable stadium experience that attracted higher attendance and matchday spending. Dein in particular was absolutely disgusted by the state of Highbury Stadium, which did not even feature a proper bathroom.⁵⁷ All-seated stadiums did, however, require renovation and out of pocket expenses that many lower league clubs could not afford. This raised more questions about the responsibility of the league and football governing bodies to aiding clubs that could not meet the new regulations while other clubs were able to simply rebuild huge sections of their stadium, or even fund a new stadium altogether. Lower league sides campaigned for a relaxation of the policy that allowed a stadium transition within their budgets, and eventually the government agreed to subsidize a portion of stadium conversions.⁵⁸ Such involvement by the government in football was unprecedented, but the new policies were successful in preventing overcrowding and crushing incidents. They also allowed for tighter regulation of fans

⁵⁷ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*. 53-54.

Stadiums in the 1980s were an abysmal place for everything other than football. Instead of a bathroom there was often only a trough or a ditch dug in the ground. Even Wembley Stadium, the home of the English national team and numerous FA Cup, League Cup, Playoff, and European finals, was demolished at the turn of the century.

⁵⁸ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*. 75.

entering the stadium, sectioning for potentially disruptive and violent supporters' groups, and a gradual increase in ticket prices as clubs looked to maximize matchday revenue.

Heysel and Hillsborough were tragic events that rocked English football to its core. These incidents brought a number of long-festered issues within the English game into the spotlight, and the British government's involvement highlighted the severity of the situation. Historian David Goldblatt argued in his book *The Game of our Lives* that the English FA was largely absent from football governance since its inception in 1863, which resulted in a serious crisis for the survival of the game.⁵⁹ The tragedies and hooliganism brought the mismanagement into public safety discourse, and the FA faced a reckoning in the 1980s. The government stepped in where the FA did nothing, and after over 100 years of being left to its own devices, Parliament began taking a serious interest in public policy concerning football. "[The FA's] autonomy from both political and economic power was crumbling," Goldblatt writes. "Hillsborough and its judicial aftermath drew the entire football industry into an extended and now semi permanent relationship with the state."⁶⁰ In the late 1980s English football entered a period where unprecedented change was both possible and necessary. The FA, which was more than willing to negotiate with clubs over the formation of the Premier League, had historically deferred micro-management of clubs to the Football League, but began assisting the biggest and richest clubs in their coup.

The merging factors of increase in club expenses, and attempts by the league and top clubs to provide relief for smaller clubs, led many wealthier clubs to consider a push

⁵⁹ David Goldblatt, *The Game of our Lives: The English Premier League and the Making of Modern Britain*. (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2014), 381-382.

⁶⁰ Goldblatt, *The Game of our Lives*. 382.

for more voting and representative power in the FA and Football League decision-making. Despite the new commercial focus from individual clubs, the impact on English football as a whole in the late 1980s had yet to manifest in a breakaway or television deal, but clubs were looking to increase their influence on the governance of the game in a way that clubs could maximize revenue across the league. Maximizing revenue became a primary focus for many clubs as expenses piled up in the wake of stadium reform, but, in fact, revenue had been a major focus in the top division for some time by the time Hillsborough happened. Bigger clubs like Manchester United and Liverpool began this shift in focus as a means of funding their efforts to remain big clubs in the 1970s. Advertising deals between clubs and commercial partners increased in both occurrence and profit for clubs with global exposure and reputation. At this time there was also the emergence of shirt sponsorship deals emerged, in which companies paid a club for the right to display their brand logo on the team shirt. Though this practice is universal in the modern game, it was unprecedented at the top of the English league pyramid before Liverpool brokered a deal with Japanese company Hitachi in 1979.⁶¹ Even shirt and kit manufacturing deals were not as common as they are in the game now, and the top clubs began to focus on these as extra avenues of cash as well. Manufacturers such as Adidas, Umbro, and Puma were happy to oblige as clubs began demanding higher payments for the right to produce official club gear and merchandise. This was a particularly useful practice for clubs whose ownership shares were bought up at higher rates by individual people or corporate groups. Ownership takeover was costly, and owners saw these deals

⁶¹ Khokhal, Nabeel. "Liverpool FC's Shirt Sponsorship and Kit Manufacturers History," *Bleacher Report*, October 24, 2011. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/904378-liverpool-fcs-kit-manufacturers-and-shirts-sponsorship-history> (October 15, 2020).

as a means to replenish the out of pocket expenses that takeovers required, immediately putting a revenue stream into the club to help fund expenses.

Though the formation of the Premier League did not happen until the 1992/93 season, the groundwork was laid by the big clubs for years prior.

Founding the Premier League

The top clubs in the First Division took it upon themselves to discuss the formation of a new league, one in which they had more say over league governance and marketing. Arsenal and Manchester United chairmen, David Dein and Martin Edwards respectively, led the charge, and were joined by club executives from Tottenham, Liverpool, and Everton as well in their frequent meetings, which were aimed at creating a shared emphasis on economic, revenue-focused approaches to club management.⁶² They looked to drum up support in television, meeting with television executives from multiple broadcasters in hopes of creating a bidding war, and companies ITV and BSkyB quickly emerged as the leading contenders.⁶³ Though there was financial motivation for the FA as well as the clubs, and revenue growth after 1992 demonstrated this, the FA's rapid growth was only a fraction of the profit that certain individual clubs would receive. Between 1990 and 2011 the FA's turnover grew from £3-4 million to over £300 million, and still the FA's economic growth was only "about the same economic size as a single big club."⁶⁴ Clubs also held significant voting power in the Premier League. Each active club is considered a "shareholder" of the Premier League, and, since the Premier League

⁶² Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*. 75.

⁶³ Bose, Mihir. *Game Changer: How the English Premier League Came to Dominate the World*. (London: Marshall Cavendish International, 2012). 87.

⁶⁴ Goldblatt, *The Game of our Lives*. 384.

£3-4 million is close to \$5 million, and £300 million is almost \$400 million

is autonomous from the Football League, clubs in the Premier League only need to achieve a majority vote of fourteen out of twenty clubs to pass proposed amendments.⁶⁵ The influence of the biggest clubs in the country manifested in voting power in the form of the Premier League, which was a remarkable demonstration of economic will. Clubs took advantage of the power vacuum in the sport, and created a more profitable, and eventually a more accessible and entertaining, footballing product.

The breakaway agenda went through officially in May 1992. Though the Football League did not want to lose its management of the First Division, the FA backing off the Premier League plan meant that clubs were able to break away en masse to form the Premier League for the start of the 1992/93 season. Clubs were ready to back the breakaway with the knowledge that television revenue would be secured via a deal with either BSkyB or ITV that summer. Australian entrepreneur Rupert Murdoch, who was a constant figure in Margaret Thatcher's new privatized British economy, saw the television deal as a potentially monumental moment for his young satellite broadcasting company. Murdoch, aware of the serious competition for television rights, decided to pull the trigger and bid for the exclusive live broadcasting rights to the Premier League with BBC's Match of the Day securing the weekend highlights and wrap-up show.⁶⁶ BSkyB's joint offer with the BBC was worth around £300 million, a much improved offer on their initial proposal. Interest from terrestrial broadcasting company ITV increased when it was clear the Premier League breakaway would take place, and details of their massive

⁶⁵ "About the Premier League: Organising Body of the Competition," Premier League, <https://www.premierleague.com/about> (October 30, 2020).

⁶⁶ Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*, 88.

bid were leaked to BSkyB leading up to the league's vote on which television deal they would accept.

The details of the breakaway and broadcasting battle were followed closely by British journalists, and the drama of the Premier League's formation and television bidding war was nearly as enthralling as Leeds United's First Division title race with Manchester United. The drama really took off when it was discovered that ITV's improved offer was leaked to BSkyB days before the Premier League was set to vote, prompting Murdoch's company to up their bid. The clubs narrowly voted, fourteen to six, in favor of the BSkyB deal. ITV was furious, and the company sought legal action against the Premier League and its executive, Rick Parry. ITV had not learned of BSkyB's improved bid until after the result of the vote, and had assumed there was something happening under the table. In fact, someone had informed BSkyB of the rival offer in advance, but not ITV when BSkyB upped their own bid. *The Daily Mirror* reported that Alan Sugar had phoned BSkyB to tell them of ITV's deal, and said, "blow them out of the water."⁶⁷ Sugar, who had previous ties to Murdoch in business, became a part owner of Tottenham Hotspur in 1991, and was thus involved in the broadcasting vote as a representative of the North London club. The report was covered sensationalistically, and the dispute between the broadcasting companies and the Premier League became very public.

ITV accused the Premier League and their negotiators of "sabotage," and demanded more time to adjust their offer.⁶⁸ ITV went after the FA as well, and submitted

⁶⁷ Matt Hughes, "ITV Slam Sugar over Premier deal," *Daily Mirror*, May 22, 1992.

⁶⁸ Hughes, "TV Slam Sugar over Premier deal."

a writ against both the FA and the Premier League, seeking damages after losing the rights to FA Cup broadcasting later that same summer.⁶⁹ ITV and Channel 4 were terrestrial channels in the UK, meaning that its content was broadcast publicly via broadcast waves rather than privately, and largely maintained a monopoly on British television. The exclusivity of BSkyB as a satellite company was a threat to the very method of television broadcasting, and the deal with the Premier League was indeed a monumental shift towards satellite television in Britain. It was yet another revolutionary result of the moment, and gave the Premier League even more hype going into the first season. BSkyB and the Premier League were both winners in that regard.

Accusations of greediness on the part of the clubs was not necessarily incorrect, but it was a transition long in the making behind the scenes. Channel 4, another television network, feared this sort of mega-deal, claiming BSkyB could “devour” them before long.⁷⁰ The BBC had concerns initially, but became a strong ally in the takeover bid with acquisition of rights to the FA Cup and the revival of weekend wrap-up show *Match of the Day*.⁷¹ The Premier League simply replaced the old first division, and the addition of the BBC, the most storied and respected British broadcasting institution, to its ranks gave the transition a much more normal feel. English club football well and truly became a capitalist venture. In American fashion, Sky TV helped to flex out the schedule of games to accommodate television viewers all weekend long, and even incorporated a Premier League edition of *Monday Night Football* to broadcast, usually, one of the more

⁶⁹ “ITV enraged by FA Stance,” *The Evening Herald*, June 6, 1992.

⁷⁰ Georgina Henry, “Grade calls for media review of ownership on BSkyB deal”. *The Guardian*, May 30, 1992. 3.

⁷¹ Michael Leapman “BBC chiefs took decisive role in football deal”. *The Independent*. May 20, 1992, 3.

intriguing matchups of the weekend in a prime-time weekday slot.⁷² The set up was complete with half-time analysis, sports talk shows before and after match-days, and noticeably improved television production quality. Murdoch and Sky spared no expense in their efforts to make the Premier League viewing experience elite.

Jonathan Clegg and Joshua Robinson view the Premier League deal as a fairly substantial risk for BSkyB to have taken considering the state of English Football at the time, a company that was moving along slowly to convince viewers of their satellite television package.⁷³ Murdoch's company was in serious debt, nearly 2bn pounds, after he successfully merged his Sky TV with another broadcaster, BSB, in 1990.⁷⁴ Two years later the company was still treading water, and struggling to attract subscribers. Exclusive rights to Premier League broadcasting would not immediately change the company's fortunes, but offered a long-term avenue of profitability and customer loyalty by broadcasting the most popular sport in the country. Though it was impossible to predict just how much the sports broadcasting market would explode over the coming decades, it was certainly easy to see the potential for it. The National Football League in the United States proved its sporting dominance through the value of its television deals, and the same potential was seen in Britain by Murdoch and club chairmen.⁷⁵ There was demand for greater coverage of live football matches on television, and the Premier League's founders saw this as a significant source of marketing and revenue.

⁷² Clegg and Robinson, *The Club*, 87-88.

⁷³ Clegg and Robinson. *The Club*. 32-33.

⁷⁴ Mihir Bose, *Game Changer: How the English Premier League Came to Dominate the World*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012), 76.

⁷⁵ Clegg and Robinson. *The Club*. 52.

Along with the risk of significant financial loss, the product came with a substantial public relations burden when it came to the hooliganism of English fans. Memory of the Heysel Stadium Disaster in 1985 was alive and well, even in the minds of Britons themselves. Many had been turned off the sport due to the deterioration of the in-person experience, and politicians, especially the Margaret Thatcher-led Conservative majority, often sided against fans. It was not uncommon for Britons to be looked down upon in the sport and its culture rather intensely, even after the post-Heysel and Hillsborough reforms and Football Spectators Act of 1989. An England semi-final run at the 1990 FIFA World Cup, hosted in Italy, paired with more hooliganism and arrests by fans travelling abroad, and clashes with Italian police dominated headlines around the world.⁷⁶ The reputation was persistent with English football's history, but there was also evidence that the domestic game was cleaning itself up.

Hooliganism's legacy in England, though fresh on the mind in the Premier League era, was beginning to dissipate. Football arrests dramatically decreased over the next two decades, and by the 2010s it was considered an annoyance rather than a public safety issue. "Hooliganism, which was once considered a cancer, is now more like a cold sore," football writer Sean Ingle wrote for *The Guardian*. "[Hooliganism is] an irritation that flares up every so often rather than something that people feared could be terminal."⁷⁷ The tone began to change in the early 1990s, and UEFA lifted its post-Heysel

⁷⁶ Clyde Haberman, "Fan Violence at World Cup Finals," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/17/sports/world-cup-90-fan-violence-at-world-cup-finals.html> (November 8, 2020).

⁷⁷ Sean Ingle. "Football hooliganism, once the English disease, is more like a cold sore now," *The Guardian*, November 3, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2013/nov/03/english-football-hooliganism> (October 30, 2020).

ban on English clubs competing in European competitions, but there was still the threat that English football would fail to reach its former heights competitively. The Hillsborough Disaster had also generated a lot of sympathy for English fans, and shed light on the role of authority in causing incidents. The rebranding of English football included its international image, and the increase in oversight by both the government and footballing bodies did result in diminishing fan violence. Arrest records show that between 1989 and 1992 the average number of total fan arrests of clubs from all four league divisions decreased by almost two-thousand.⁷⁸

Big Four, Big Six, and Big Issues

Though it is easy to trace the emergence of profit-focused methods by the football league, this did not always translate to success for clubs. The massive gap in annual revenue that came with playing in the Premier league versus playing in the 2nd division, now called the Championship division, was a tremendous motivation for clubs to avoid relegation. Television revenue increased with each deal the Premier League signed, both domestically and internationally. Teams that kept their quality year in and year out did not have much problem financially, and there was a clear consolidation of power for the best teams. These were the teams that could afford to keep spending to compete rather than relying on their ability to develop quality talent.

⁷⁸ “Football-related arrests statistics, England and Wales, 1984 to 1985 season to 1999 to 2000 season” <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-statistics-england-and-wales-1984-to-1985-through-to-1999-to-2000> (October 30, 2020).

The British Government provides useful statistics of football-related arrests from the Home Office’s statistics at www.gov.uk. These statistics are available for download in spreadsheets for specific seasons. Trend shows a gradual decline, particularly in the Premier League. Should also be noted that the statistics appear to be more organized and well-kept after the start of the Premier League era as well. The Football League’s records are more orderly as well from 1991 to present.

The wealth gap that grew between the Premier League and the Championship division exacerbated the wealth gap between teams at or near the highest level of play. Football economist Stefan Szymanski wrote that the general understanding in football economics in the early Premier League era was that clubs often had to spend more than they made in order to win. However, in Manchester United Szymanski found a unique pairing of profitability and sporting success.⁷⁹ Szymanski's article was written in 1998, just one year after Manchester United's fourth Premier League title in five years, and claimed that Manchester United was picking up steam as both an economic and sporting force without buckling under the financial weight of sporting sustainability. Manager Alex Ferguson, knighted as Sir Alex Ferguson in 1999, turned the club into a dynasty in the 1990s. The success continued into the 2000s as the club and Premier League grew into global brands respectively, and their popularity exploded worldwide. The Premier League offered an enormous platform to whatever clubs could win, and Manchester United took full advantage of the opening for a new power in English football.

The formation of the Premier League for the 1992/93 season came at an interesting time for shifting power in the game as well. Liverpool, who had dominated football in the 1970s and 1980s, declined in form dramatically in the 1990s. The power vacuum left by Liverpool for the rest of the league to compete did inspire English fans at the start of the Premier League era. Clubs such as Aston Villa, Norwich City, and

⁷⁹ Stefan Szymanski. "Why is Manchester United so Successful?" *Business Strategy Review*. 48-49.

Szymanski's began to make a name for himself in football economics in the 1990s, and this article in particular demonstrated the significance of Manchester United's rising power for the rest of the game. The expense that was so often associated with building a strong team was no longer a burden for the top club in England, and this sustainability would soon be replicated across Europe.

Blackburn Rovers became surprising competitors with Arsenal and Leeds United for the league title, and Manchester United, who had been complacent since their first period of league success ended in the early 1970s.⁸⁰ Manchester United won the first ever Premier League title in 1993, and repeated as champions four more times throughout the decade.⁸¹ In 1993/94 and 1995/96 the club completed Premier League and FA Cup doubles, and won an unprecedented English Treble in 1998/99 by winning the Premier League, FA Cup, and UEFA Champions League. Manchester United's hegemony in the first two decades of the Premier League was challenged by only a handful of teams. Arsenal were champions in 1997/98, 2001/02, and 2003/04, and Chelsea in 2004/05, 2005/06, and 2009/10, but they were the only two clubs that consistently challenged Manchester United in that time.⁸² Arsenal were an established team historically, and well-funded as one of London's top clubs. Chelsea on the other hand represented a very different threat, the threat of a nouveau riche club owned by an individual willing and able to spend whatever amount of money was necessary to build a world class team. Manchester City, another new money team, emerged in the 2010s, winning four league titles in that decade, but Chelsea were the first to make a major splash in the Premier League era.

The Big Four, which consisted of Manchester United, Arsenal, Chelsea, and Liverpool, emerged in the mid-2000s, but in reality the groundwork for their dominance

⁸⁰ Murphy, Alex. *The Official Illustrated History of Manchester United*. (London: Orion Books, 2008), 304-323.

Manchester United were the first English club to win the European Cup, doing so in 1968, and were considered the most successful club in English football until a steep decline in the 1970s. They were even relegated in 1974, their first since the early 1900s, but immediately earned promotion the next season and have remained there since.

⁸¹ Murphy, *The Official Illustrated History of Manchester United*. 198-199.

⁸² Murphy, *The Official Illustrated History of Manchester United*. 319-323.

had been laid in the 1990s. The league successes mentioned previously demonstrates just how consistent they were, and that did not include the FA Cup or English Football League Cup. Since 1992 the FA Cup has only been won by a team other than the Big Four on 5 occasions, and two of those belong to Manchester City, after the team was bought by Sheikh Mansour in 2008.⁸³ In fact, the Big Four quickly became the Big Six, with the addition of the aforementioned Manchester City and North London club Tottenham Hotspur. Though they were not traditional powers of English Football, Manchester City and Tottenham both developed nicely under new ownership in the Premier League era, and earned consideration as contenders for silverware nearly every season.⁸⁴ The novel and consistent advantage for each of these clubs was, of course, money. The higher a club finished in the final Premier League table the more prize money they won, and finishing in a qualification spot for European competitions, especially the UEFA Champions League, guaranteed extra competition and television revenue for the next season. However, the most important factor in club financing became whether the ownership behind a club was able to provide both a sustainable source of money for club expenses and a willingness to spend big on a winning team. Though many smaller clubs were able to finish high in the Premier League table in the 1990s, this became increasingly rare from the 2000s on.⁸⁵

⁸³ “List of FA Cup winners,” *Football History*, <https://www.footballhistory.org/tournament/fa-cup.html> (November 6, 2020).

⁸⁴ “Premier League Tables,” Premier League, <https://www.premierleague.com/tables> (November 6, 2020).

The Premier League results tables for each season indicate the champion, qualification for European competition, and relegation to the Championship division. I track the trends of clubs such as Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspurs based on performances post-ownership change.

⁸⁵ “Premier League Tables,” Premier League, <https://www.premierleague.com/tables> (November 6, 2020).

The influence of wealthy ownership was especially demonstrated by Chelsea in west London. The club had experienced some success in the late 1990s, but ascended to true contender status when the club was bought by Russian billionaire oligarch Roman Abramovich in 2003. Abramovich was known for his ambition as an early Vladimir Putin backer and NTV state news owner, and was equally ambitious in football, spending a fortune for Chelsea to achieve success domestically and in Europe immediately following his takeover.⁸⁶ At this time, the Premier League and UEFA had no regulatory measures on club spending, which meant that as long as a club could sustain itself financially, it could spend whatever amount it deemed necessary on player transfers. In Abramovich's first season in charge the club spent nearly £200 million on transfers, an amount greater than the club's previous six seasons combined.⁸⁷ As a result, on the field Chelsea competed toe-to-toe with Manchester United and Arsenal in the early 2000s, and won the Premier League in 2004/05, their first league title since 1954/55.⁸⁸

Liverpool established themselves as the most successful English club by dominating the league, cup, and European competitions in the 1970s and 1980s, but did not win another league title until 2019/20 after the inception of the Premier League. They remained a contender in cup competitions, but did not come near their past successes. Regardless, they remained one of the better teams in England throughout this time, finishing near the top in every Premier League season, and even won another UEFA Champions League title in 2004/05. Players such as Steven Gerrard, Xabi Alonso, and

⁸⁶ Goldblatt, *The Game of our Lives*, 442.

⁸⁷ "Chelsea FC: Club all transfers overview," *Transfermarkt*. <https://www.transfermarkt.us/fc-chelsea/alletransfers/verein/631>

⁸⁸ "2004/05 Premier League Table." Premier League, <https://www.premierleague.com/tables?co=1&se=13&ha=-1> (November 19, 2020).

Fernando Torres were regarded as some of the best in the world at their respective positions, but they couldn't topple Manchester United, Arsenal, or Chelsea for league supremacy. A reason for this was the lack of continuity for this particular team. Alonso and Torres were both sold between 2009 and 2011, and an ownership dispute between shareholders. American investor John W. Henry and his Fenway Sports Group bought the majority shares of the club in 2010, and brought greater stability. Able to fund moves for star players under new manager Jurgen Klopp Liverpool returned to prominence, winning the UEFA Champions League in 2019 and their first ever Premier League in 2020.

The Premier League had without a doubt become a primarily profit-driven league, and with good fiscal reason. Though this came with added issues over the influence of money and corporate power over the game, and, as will be shown in the final chapter, fans in particular came to recognize many of the hindrances that corporate power placed on their agency and influence over the game. The economic takeaway here is the power of the profit motive, and the expansion of the Premier League market because of expanded television broadcasting. In 2019 the Premier League reported that it had broadcast the previous season to "188 of the world's 193 countries," and projected their programming reached an estimated audience of 1.35 billion.⁸⁹ The worldwide appeal of the Premier League has made it incredibly profitable, and television revenue alone was reported around \$1.88 billion in that same summer of 2019.⁹⁰ Though initially it was the

⁸⁹ Premier League, *Global Broadcast Report for 2018/19 shows increase in number of people watching the competition around the world*.

⁹⁰ Football Benchmark, *Broadcasting revenue landscape: Big Money in the "Big Five" leagues*. Premier League revenue (\$1.88 billion) was nearly double that of the next closest league, Spain's La Liga Primera Division (\$1.06 billion), and was miles ahead of Italy's Serie A (\$440 million), Germany's Bundesliga (\$285 million), and France's Ligue 1 (\$95 million). Monetary figures converted from Euros by Google.

domestic television broadcasting that brought in the biggest money, the expansion of the international audience has really cemented the Premier League's profitability.

The Premier League's broadcasting rights were a highly valued commodity, and since the first BSkyB deal in 1992 that value only skyrocketed. The Premier League and Rupert Murdoch's gamble on satellite television paid off big time, and the income would only grow from there. Murdoch's American television broadcasting company, Fox, fed the United States soccer fever that began in the 1990s by providing Premier League, FA Cup, and UEFA Champions League coverage on the exclusive Fox Soccer Channel, which later became a part of the Fox Sports network of channels.

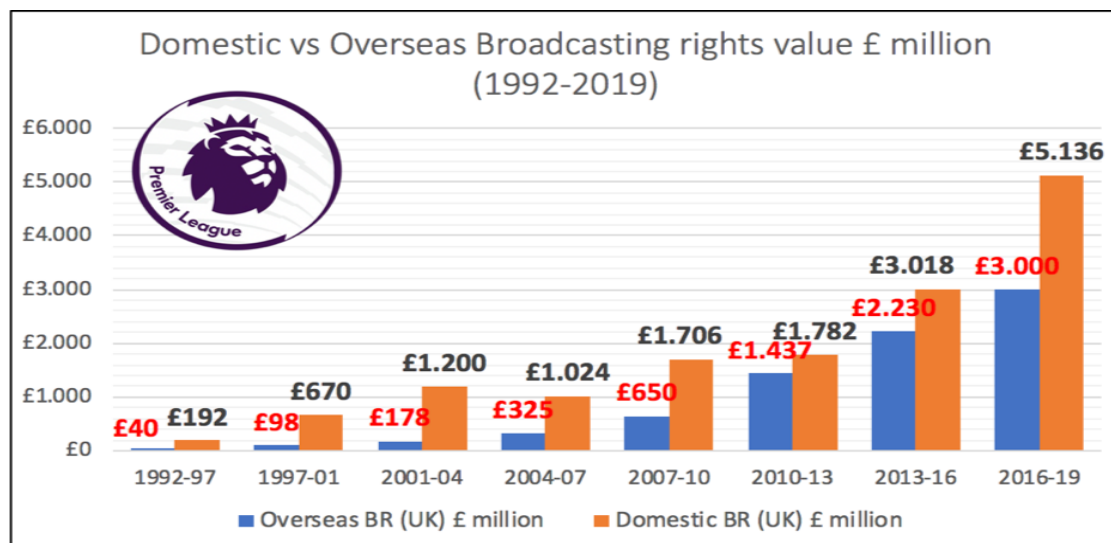


Figure 1⁹¹: Increase in value of Premier League Broadcasting rights in millions of Pounds Sterling.

The Table above demonstrates the dramatic increase in value of broadcasting rights that turned the Premier League into a financial juggernaut. The increase of international

⁹¹ Sports Business Institute Barcelona, *TV Rights in Football: Premier League analysis*. Table: Domestic vs Overseas Broadcasting rights value £ million (1992-2019).

broadcasting value, and from 2010 on the new international value nearly equals the previous valuation of the domestic broadcasting rights package.

The financial power of the Premier League was not always welcomed by players, managers, or fans of the sport. Though wages in the sport increased along with the value of the sport itself, players and managers were wary of the influence that profit has over player safety, crowded scheduling, and competitiveness. In fact, the only big club to vote for the initial BSkyB deal was Tottenham, represented by Alan Sugar, who fed BSkyB the information on ITV's deal.⁹² Concerns focused on how scheduling of fixtures would be set, and whether outside parties would have more influence than clubs when it came to constructing a schedule catered to safe maintenance of player fitness. Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson saw the potential problems with broadcasting companies controlling league schedules, and scheduling games on Monday night and other weekdays. "A deal was stamped without consultation with the most important people in the game," Ferguson said of the deal in 1992. "The managers and the players whose livelihoods are at stake."⁹³ Arsene Wenger, Arsenal manager from 1996-2018, has similarly voiced displeasure with the control of television companies in setting football schedules. "We have sold our soul," Wenger said, "It is the truth and I cannot say [the television influence] is wrong, but it is not normal that you can have direct influence on the schedule through TV."⁹⁴ Ferguson and Wenger, both highly influential figures in the game, highlighted a problem that persisted for big clubs in England. The Professional

⁹² Miller, Jonathan and Mihir Bose "Snatch of the Day: BSkyB and ITV clash over football rights," *The Sunday Times*, May 24, 1992, 12.

⁹³ Derek Potter, "Premier TV Deal Under Attack." *The Independent*, May 22, 1992. 32.

⁹⁴ "Wenger rues power of Television over game." *BBC News*, January 13, 2012.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/16550777> (November 6, 2020).

Footballers' Association, which represented the players, made some fuss over the issue as well, but were quickly sold on guarantees of increased compensation.⁹⁵

Manchester United, Arsenal, and the other big clubs maintained a vested interest in spreading games out more over the course of a season due to the greater number of games and competitions they played in as opposed to smaller clubs. Participants in European competitions played anywhere from six to sixteen more games per season than clubs that failed to qualify, and those clubs often advanced further in domestic cups such as the FA Cup and EFL Cup as well. The crowded fixtures enacted a physical toll on players, who were also subject to extra travelling between matches. Many of these bigger clubs played between fifty and sixty matches in a season, which took place between August and May of the following year. Despite the schedule complaints, and the massive financial pressure to perform, the biggest clubs were the ones who benefited most from the Premier League setup. It was fitting, as it was these clubs that led the realization of the Premier League, and their club owners and chairmen were the minds behind its inception. It was also ironic as it was their managers who were most concerned over television companies controlling fixture scheduling. Fiscally speaking, the Premier League became exactly what the big clubs hoped it would, and its participants each reaped enormous financial benefits because of it.

However, importantly, the growing wealth gap made it more difficult for those teams that must be relegated to the lower division, and eventually prompted greater financial reliance by the Football League on the Premier League. With the start of the

⁹⁵ Jason Rodrigues, "Premier League football at 20: 1992, the start of a whole new ball game," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/from-the-archive-blog/2012/feb/02/20-years-premier-league-football-1992>

2006/07 season, clubs relegated from the Premier League began to receive “parachute payments” as a safety net for financial survival as they adjust to playing in a lower, poorer division.⁹⁶ The Football League and its clubs operated economically independently from the Premier League until this moment, and the worrying state of football clubs on the brink of bankruptcy prompted the Premier League to get involved. Parachute payments were made to relegated teams, and “solidarity” payments of £1 million were made to each of the other EFL Championship clubs to help alleviate concerns of financial advantage for clubs receiving parachute payments.⁹⁷ This created a quasi-welfare state in English football, and further demonstrated just how much the Premier League had grown apart from the Football League since the breakaway in 1992. Bearing partial financial responsibility for clubs in lower divisions was an interesting new precedent for a system based largely on competition, and was indicative of the danger posed to clubs that could not stay up in the Premier League. With three clubs guaranteed to be relegated each season there was guaranteed financial risk for every club, but the richest of the rich never faced such danger. Achieving success in the sport became more dependent on money than ever before.

The problem of clubs unable to keep up with top flight sides competitively and financially was not new, but the wealth gap had made it nearly impossible for teams to rise from the ranks. Another issue was teams that were relegated from the Premier League buckled under the weight of financing their Premier League squads in lower

⁹⁶ David Conn, “Promised land of promotion comes at a steep price.” *The Guardian*, May 27, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2008/may/28/premierleague.championship> (November 6, 2020)

⁹⁷ Conn, “Promised Land of Promotion.”

leagues, and there were some cases of relegated clubs declaring bankruptcy or dissolving entirely. Though it has largely been smaller clubs that have suffered this fate, there are examples of big, well-funded clubs such as Newcastle United and Leeds United that suffered relegation. Leeds United especially had an historic downfall that nearly led to the collapse of the club.

Leeds United provides a remarkable example of the potential disasters that come with relegation. Leeds United were a team that challenged for the Premier League a couple times in the 1990s, and built a highly competitive team in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They even reached the semi-final of the UEFA Champions League in 2001, losing to eventual runners-up Valencia.⁹⁸ Within the next couple of seasons the club could no longer avoid the massive debt they had incurred, and they were forced to sell star players such as Rio Ferdinand, Jonathan Woodgate, and Robbie Keane.⁹⁹ Leeds United were relegated from the Premier League at the end of the 2003/04 season, finishing in nineteenth place. Three years later, they finished bottom of the Championship division, and were relegated to League 1, the third tier of English league football. The club were penalized fifteen league points for the 2006/07, and their lackluster squad failed to make up the ground.¹⁰⁰ In just six seasons, a club that was a challenger for the highest honor in

⁹⁸ “Leeds’ luck finally runs out in Valencia,” *BBC*, May 8, 2001.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/champions_league/1317114.stm

⁹⁹ Tim Rich, “Venables in fury as Leeds agree to sell Ferdinand for £30m,” *The Independent*, July 22, 2002, <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/venables-in-fury-as-leeds-agree-to-sell-ferdinand-for-30m-185235.html> (November 6, 2020).

Leeds United’s financial situation was so dire after 2002 that they sold their best players to rival clubs, a move that rarely happened in the highly competitive English top flight. Rio Ferdinand, one of the best defenders in the country moved to Manchester United for a then British record fee. He won the Premier League that first season, and went on to become one of the most decorated players in the club’s history.

¹⁰⁰ “Leeds relegated after entering administration,” *The Guardian*, May 4, 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2007/may/04/newsstory.leedsunited1>

club football was struggling for survival in the English third tier. The collapse of Leeds United alarmed the Premier League, Football League, and the FA, and directly influenced the installment of parachute payments.¹⁰¹ Though the payments are still used, and gave significant aid to relegated sides, there were still cases of clubs falling and collapsing under the financial weight of their financial upkeep. Bolton Wanderers, Blackburn Rovers, and Portsmouth Football Club were three more examples of clubs that struggled with relegation, and remained in the lower divisions. Blackburn Rovers were Premier League Champions in 1994/95 and still had to sell their best player, Alan Shearer, in 1996. Shearer joined Blackburn for a record fee in 1992, but success did not bring the financial stability needed to maintain the team.¹⁰² Blackburn declined soon after, and were relegated to the Championship division in 1998/99.¹⁰³ The fall of clubs due to finances was indicative of the broad wealth gap between the leagues, as well as the immense power that Premier League money had on football clubs. Financial comfort was reserved for a few clubs at the top as the others fought desperately to stay alive and climb the ladder.

The Premier League was a far from perfect sports model, but it served its founders well for what it set out to do. It made English football rich, and propped up some of the biggest clubs in the world on a nearly insurmountable pile of cash and trophies. The system spread too, and the game started to revolve almost entirely around

¹⁰¹ Conn, "Promised Land of Promotion."

¹⁰² On This Day in 1992: Alan Shearer joined Blackburn for a British record fee," *Yahoo Sports*, July 27, 2020, <https://sports.yahoo.com/day-1992-alan-shearer-joined-050000789.html> (November 20, 2020).

¹⁰³ "1998/99 Premier League Table," Premier League, <https://www.premierleague.com/matchweek/279/table> (November 19, 2020).

financial stability and revenue. It raised the competitive and economic stakes at every professional tier football, and honed in focus across the sport on maximizing revenue for clubs and competitions alike. Still problems remained in the world that the Premier League created, and the culture of the sport felt a dramatic shift as well. Fans and club life evolved in some unpredictable ways after the establishment of the Premier League. Money remained central to English football, and the fallout of commercial motivations was impactful at multiple levels of the sport. The moment that allowed for the Premier League's foundation to occur was born out of reckoning with English football's oldest and ugliest problems, many of which still needed to be addressed. Racism and xenophobia directed at players and fans of the sport continued the conversations about space and safety that Heysel and Hillsborough had started. Consolidation of club ownership under one person or corporate entity strengthened the fiscal and marketing power of clubs, but weakened the influence of fans and fan ownership groups. The expansion of club fandom internationally raised questions of cultural legitimacy within the mainstream. These are areas that will be explored in the next chapters.

CHAPTER III - SAME PLACE, DIFFERENT FACES: ANTI-RACIST ACTIVISM IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE'S FOOTBALL COMMUNITIES

On January 25, 1995 Manchester United traveled to Selhurst Park in London to face Crystal Palace. Manchester United was closing out a hectic winter schedule in the middle of their quest for a third straight Premier League title. The score was 1-0 after the first half of play in a physical game, and Palace defender Richard Shaw had played particularly physically in defense while man-marking Manchester United's star forward, Eric Cantona. Cantona, an already enigmatic figure within the Mancunian revival under Sir Alex Ferguson, had a bit of a reputation for his flair and attitude. A favorite among fans, and a villain among rivals, moments where he would get heated normally fueled his performances, but on this particular day he showed no such control. Frustrated with the referee's lack of involvement in punishing the opposition's aggressive play, Cantona emerged for the second half. "No yellow cards, then?" Cantona asked referee Alan Wilkie, followed up with a "Do your fucking job" from the Manchester United manager, Ferguson.¹⁰⁴ Wilkie was unbothered by the pair, and continued to allow Palace's aggressive defending to go unpunished against the champions, and just three minutes into the second half Cantona decided he had had enough. After wrestling for possession, Cantona lashed out and kicked Shaw. He was shown a red card immediately and sent off towards the dressing room.

As Cantona was walking past the stands toward the tunnel, a Palace supporter, later identified as Matthew Simmons, ran down a few rows to shout abuse at the

¹⁰⁴ Phillippe Auclair, *Cantona: The Rebel Who Would be King*, (Macmillan: London, 2009). 743-744.

Frenchman. "You dirty French bastard," Simmons shouted, "fuck off back to France." Cantona, without much hesitation, lunged with a kung fu kick at Simmons.¹⁰⁵ He landed the kick square in the chest, and exchanged some weak punches with Simmons before being pulled away and escorted off the pitch. The match finished 1-1, with Palace utilizing their man advantage to equalize in the second half, but the headlines the next morning were focused solely on Cantona.

The kick dominated news in the footballing world, with some saying he should have been banned from the sport for life. He was stripped of his captaincy of the French national team, fined £10,000 by the FA and £20,000 by Manchester United, and handed an eight-month ban from football.¹⁰⁶ Even Ferguson initially believed that Cantona's career would be over after seeing the footage of the incident for the first time, but soon changed his mind. The Frenchman was incredibly frustrated with the punishment and media frenzy that followed him after the incident, and requested that his contract be terminated by Manchester United.¹⁰⁷ Ferguson, however, persisted, and Cantona decided to wait out the rest of his ban and return near the mid-way point of the 1995/96 season.

Ferguson's backing of Cantona was a surprising but ultimately correct decision that helped cement the legacy of both manager and player. He came back for two more seasons after his suspension, helping his team win the Premier League in both years, with one FA Cup trophy as well, before retiring at 31 to pursue a career in acting and

¹⁰⁵ Vintage Everyday, "Eric Cantona Kung-Fu Kick (1995)," YouTube, 1:34, January 25, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU6VBDnMZRg&ab_channel=VintageEveryday

¹⁰⁶ Trevor Haylett, "Cantona escapes life ban as FA takes suspension into next season," *The Independent*, February 25, 1995. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/cantona-escapes-life-ban-fa-takes-suspension-next-season-1574847.html>

¹⁰⁷ Auclair, *Cantona*, 827.

writing.¹⁰⁸ The incident itself took on a complicated legacy in terms of the relationship between players and supporters, and was significant in changing the narrative around abuse directed at players. Acts of xenophobic and racist abuse by fans had long plagued the sport in England, and this incident empowered other players despite the controversy around Cantona's violent actions. His act symbolized many players' frustrations with dealing with aggressive, often nationalistic, English fans. This chapter analyzes the problem of racism and anti-foreign sentiment in the Premier League era, showing how the game adapted to deal with issues such as racist abuse, the presence of hate groups, and abusive supporters inside and outside of football spaces. All of this must be placed within the context of the commercialization described in the previous chapter, as it was central to the diversification of the English game by giving English clubs the financial flexibility to attract top foreign players and managers. The expansion of the Premier League to international TV markets also gave added incentive to cleanse football grounds of racist behavior, although these efforts were well underway before the formation of the Premier League, through anti-racist activism and the increased presence of black British footballers.

The context of racism in English football leading into the Premier League era must therefore be unpacked, as well as the impacts of multiculturalism and globalization in European football. The formation of the Premier League came at a time when efforts to clean up fan violence were taking place at multiple levels of the game and society. By commercializing and internationalizing, the Premier League created higher stakes for

¹⁰⁸ Auclair, *Cantona*, 973.

pushing racism out of the sport, and in many ways it depended on the diversification and activism of its communities in these efforts. Activism by fans, players, clubs, and the Premier League through groups like Kick It Out was crucial in showing solidarity with players and advocating for safer football environments. Scholars Emy Onuora and Brett Bebbler have demonstrated the significance of this period of transition in regard to racism in the English game, and regardless of the success or failure of anti-racism measures or new models of club management and ownership, they were shaped by the marketability of the Premier League on a global stage. In this chapter I focus more on the agency within the game itself rather than government involvement discussed in the previous chapter because of the importance of cultural intersections and marketing campaigns in embracing a new age of the English game. Fan and player activists played crucial roles in raising awareness of issues of racism and took matters into their own hands through campaigns, advocate groups, and advertisement. Even the very presence of anti-racist activism and increase in diversity and visibility fostered environments for change, even in areas where institutional help was not offered.

Racism, Activism, and Multiculturalism in the English Game

Fan racism in England was notoriously bad in the 1970s and 1980s, fueled by the jingoist language of conservatives and far-right movements of the time in response to the growing population of black immigrants and British commonwealth migrants.¹⁰⁹ Black Britons were common by this point in time, but their acceptance in society was not. Many black Britons continued to experience racial profiling by businesses, police, and

¹⁰⁹ Onuora, Emy, *Pitch Black*, (Biteback Publishing Ltd: London, 2015), 21.

parliamentary legislation, regardless of whether there was a Labour or Conservative government.¹¹⁰ Historian Kennetta Hammond Perry has examined the issue of British identity for Black Britons arriving from commonwealth territories and former colonies of the British Empire. Her argument that British racism was structural as well as societal is relevant to football as well, and the transition to safer footballing spaces and the promotion of anti-racist ideals in the Premier League era was a reflection of the changing structures in British society. There was a strong presence of far-right and neo-Nazi groups such as the British National Front in the 1970s and 1980s, an issue that became necessary for anti-racist groups to address and stamp out. Certain groups of fans saw violence in football as inherently tied to racism, and took matters into their own hands in place of a passive police force. Football did not solve its problems of racism, let alone racism in society, but the Premier League and its clubs demonstrated that they valued the protection of their players to a much greater level than was the case just a few years prior, and black and foreign footballers continued a steady emergence in the English game.

A significant reason that football spaces became prominent arenas for battling racism in England was that football grounds proved to be remarkably focused cases of racist expression among the predominantly white working-class male fans in the 1970s and 1980s. Historian Brett Bebbber addressed the complexity of this majority population at football grounds, and pointed out that while this was the demographic of the perpetrators, it was also the demographic of many of the activists. Anti-racists became

¹¹⁰ Hammond Perry, Kennetta, *London is the Place for Me*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2015).

more confrontational with racist groups and individuals, encouraged rival fans to speak up against racism at their grounds, and demanded more diversity from their clubs in their recruitment of players and managers.¹¹¹ A trend developed too that indicated fans' desire for agency over the situation. Bebber wrote: "Regardless of their level of ease with political activism, some supporters defended their right and responsibility to police their own terraces and assume the burden of keeping racism outside the game, especially when it kept other parties at bay."¹¹² Bebber's evidence included clashes between supporters' trusts and clubs over stadium rules policing hate groups, indicating a strong will by anti-racists to be a part of the solution. An issue with this was fan participation in hostilities between groups, something that the government was trying to get rid of at that time. As was discussed in the previous chapter, acts of Parliament and spectator policy in the mid-1980s heightened police control at and around football grounds. With racist and anti-racist fans clashing, policing hooliganism encompassed both groups, further complicating the problem.

The hostile environments created by hooligans were exacerbated by the presence of racist individuals and gangs, and projectiles and Bananas were commonly thrown onto the pitch for games in which black players were featured. Emy Onuora, a British scholar of race, identity, and sport, has argued that as the population of Britain became more diverse, and black footballers in particular became more visible, the racism inherent in social arenas such as football became more silenced and/or pushed to the periphery. He cited the political activism of a younger generation of Britons and the reaction against

¹¹¹ Bebber, Brett, *Violence and Racism in Football*, (London: Pickering & Chatto Limited, 2012), 189-190.

¹¹² Bebber, *Violence and Racism in Football*, 191.

Thatcherism in the 1990s. Bebbler also notes that the opportunity for activism through football was recognized by groups such as the Commission for Racial Equality.¹¹³ Placing football within this context demonstrates the significance of the sport in British society and culture, and gives greater meaning to the study of the diversity in the game. The arrival of a more diverse pool of footballers and managers was vital to the growth of the Premier League and the establishment of its reputation as a premier sporting spectacle.

The racism in this new era of the game was being ushered out at a rate similar to the rate that black players, whether foreign or British, were ushered into the professional ranks of the English game. Ian Wright, one of the first black English superstars of the game, made his name at Crystal Palace before joining reigning First Division champions Arsenal in 1991, a year before the Premier League's formation. He was sensational there, and in just seven seasons became the club's all-time leading goal-scorer, helping the club to a Premier League and FA Cup double in 1998 under new manager Arsene Wenger. Wright and Wenger didn't spend much time together, as Wright left the club soon after, but both made an important impact in regards to black and foreign presence in the English game. Arsenal grew complacent under Scottish manager George Graham, and a bold decision was made to bring in Wenger. Wenger, a French manager who had been managing in the Japanese top league was dubbed a "graduate of the global game" by Glenn Moore of *The Independent*, who noted the time "might be right" for a foreign manager given the opening of minds in the English game.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Bebbler, *Violence and Racism in Football*, 14.

¹¹⁴ Glenn Moore, "A graduate of the global game," *The Independent*, September 23, 1996. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/a-graduate-of-the-global-game-1364848.html>

The new boss introduced a new style to the game, and competed with British managers by mixing tough, physical play with elegant attacking flair. The 4-4-2 formation, a favorite of Wenger in his time at Arsenal, crowded the midfield with intelligent hybrid wingers playing behind playmaking forwards that liked to get involved in buildup play. English football was guilty throughout its history of being relatively closed-minded, and opening it up to new ideas was difficult to accomplish. Jonathan Wilson, an expert on the history of the development and sharing of football tactics, labels English football as “pragmatic,” and demonstrates well how English teams responded when they realized they needed to change their style of play in order to compete at a high level internationally.¹¹⁵ The Premier League era was one such era in England, and the dominance of Manchester United domestically indicated other clubs’ styles needed tinkering, and the hybridization of the English game with foreign tactics began.

Wenger spent heavily adding foreign players to a mostly English squad at Arsenal. The introduction of so many new players brought the risk of angering players that preceded him at the club, but he managed the balance well. The diversity of the squad worked perfectly in his hybrid tactical setup, pairing physical defending with bold and beautiful attacking movements. He was careful to not upset the existing squad, giving them fair competition for places and getting the best out of a group that had underachieved in the Premier League to that point.¹¹⁶

Wenger’s arrival was met with some heavy criticism, and players and fans alike were unsure of the hire as a replacement to the once highly successful George Graham.

¹¹⁵ Jonathan, *Inverting the Pyramid*, (Orion Publishing Group Limited: London, 2018), 122.

¹¹⁶ Rivoire, Xavier, *Arsène Wenger: The Biography*, (Aurum Books: London, 2011), 82.

Club captain Tony Adams recalled wondering whether he could even speak English, and said to have thought “what does this Frenchman know about football?”¹¹⁷ Even in hindsight, Adams’ comments reflecting on his skepticism revealed a close-mindedness by English players in regard to foreigners. Despite possessing a well-traveled experience in management, Wenger was still reduced to his being not English by his own players. Wenger was at first unpopular with the Arsenal squad too because of his distaste for the English drinking culture. He limited how much players could drink, banned drinking in the players lounge, which caught the attention and scrutiny of tabloid media, but improved performances nonetheless.¹¹⁸ Wenger soon proved doubters wrong, winning the Premier League and FA Cup Double in just his second season in 1997/98, again in 2002, and winning the Premier League in 2003/04 with an unbeaten league record, a feat that hadn’t been achieved in the English top tier since Preston North End accomplished it in the 1888/89 season. Though Arsenal didn’t match the dominance and longevity of Sir Alex Ferguson’s Manchester United, they were proof that new styles and players could successfully mold the English game, and do so without abandoning popular principles of the English game. “Globalization is blurring national styles,” Jonathan Wilson wrote in his book *Inverting the Pyramid*, “but tradition, perpetuated by coaches, players, pundits, and fans, is strong enough that styles remain distinguishable.”¹¹⁹ This can be used to describe the Premier League as well. Wenger and many foreign managers that came to the Premier League after him found success by blending tactics, and more importantly

¹¹⁷ Jeremy Wilson, "Arsenal players hail Arsène Wenger as he becomes club's longest-serving manager". *The Daily Telegraph*, October 1, 2009.

¹¹⁸ Ray Ryan, "Wenger's booze ban!". *News of the World*, September 29, 1996. 80.

¹¹⁹ Wilson, *Inverting the Pyramid*, xxi.

integrating themselves, their methods, and their culture into English clubs. Simply put, the top teams from then on required diversity in tactics to achieve success in England and in Europe. New managers and new players from around the world helped improve the Premier League product and its global marketability.

There were a few issues as well when it came to policing high profile players who, and even Kick It Out, the Premier League's oldest anti-racism group, bore criticism for inaction and austerity in some high profile cases. Kick It Out, born of the Premier League's "Let's Kick Racism Out of Football" campaign started in 1993, evolved into one of the most expansive and supported anti-racism projects in Britain. The organization was government backed, as well as supported by the FA and the PFA. It is a leading force in the Football Against Racism in Europe organization, and earned official backing by UEFA as well. However, despite the broad support for Kick It Out, there were notable criticisms akin to those against the governing bodies of football in England. There was perceived inaction when it came to punishing racist abuse by high profile players, which hindered the organization's public image. Two primary incidents in question were John Terry's alleged racist remarks directed at QPR defender Anton Ferdinand and Luis Suarez's racist remarks directed at Manchester United's Patrice Evra, both occurring in the 2011/12 season. The FA did not punish Terry after an investigation into the incident, and the response from Ferdinand and QPR supporters was furious, especially after Luis Suarez was punished severely for his case.¹²⁰ The Liverpool forward was banned for eight matches and fined £40,000, which prompted a similarly controversial protest

¹²⁰ Daniel Taylor, "Liverpool furious as Luis Suárez banned in Patrice Evra racism row," *The Guardian*, December 20, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2011/dec/20/liverpool-luis-suarez-patrice-evra>

movement by Liverpool supporters and players, and even the manufacture of apparel showing support for Suarez.¹²¹ Manchester United star defender Rio Ferdinand, Anton's brother, retired from the England national team over the incident, and refused to continue supporting Kick It Out campaigns because of the organization's lack of action against Terry.¹²² At the time of doing so Ferdinand was the starting centre back alongside Terry in the England squad, and left the team just ahead of England's trip to the UEFA European Championships. The decision by England and the FA to do nothing at a seemingly pivotal moment is emblematic of the frustrations that Ferdinand and many other black footballers felt with English footballing institutions. Both the defence of Suarez by Liverpool players and fans and the inaction against Terry by the FA and Chelsea symbolized the austerity that diluted anti-racist messages despite the diversification of the game.

These incidents show that money and diversification clearly did not completely solve problems of racism at the bigger clubs, and Chelsea Football Club were an excellent example. They were one of many clubs with a reputation for racist supporters at their ground of Stamford Bridge, and though the problem was addressed to a degree inside the ground problems persisted from the club's fanbase. Damon Albarn, frontman for music groups Blur and Gorillaz, and one of Chelsea's more famous fans, first attempted to get more into the sport at the start of the Premier League era, but he and his

¹²¹ Andy Hunter, "Liverpool shirts supporting Luis Suárez 'shameful', says Paul McGrath," *The Guardian*, December 22, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2011/dec/22/liverpool-shirts-luis-suarez>

¹²² Ian Rodgers, "Rio Ferdinand's England Retirement Is Disappointing End for Man Utd Defender," *Bleacher Report*, May 15, 2013. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1640285-rio-ferdinands-england-retirement-is-disappointing-end-for-man-utd-defender>

bandmates were reportedly turned off by the aggressive racism of other Chelsea supporters at the ground.¹²³ As Chelsea emerged as a more competitive side in the 1990s and 2000s they became more visible, as did the ugly side of their fanbase. Despite Chelsea's transformation into one of the most prominent clubs in football, winning the Premier League and Champions League with a diverse squad of African, Asian, European, and South American players, the fanbase had long been unwelcoming to say the least when it comes to black players.¹²⁴ Even Avram Grant, one of Chelsea's many managers in the Premier League era, was subject to anti-semitic abuse from his club's own supporters in online forums.¹²⁵ Grant, a descendant of Holocaust survivors, was also mailed a powder substance at the Chelsea training ground. The continuous abuse from the small portion of the fanbase did not last, as Grant was sacked in 2008 and moved to another club, but is indicative of the level of commitment that racist fans still had to harassing and intimidating individuals in the twenty-first century. Chelsea was the subject of an FA investigation for racist acts by fans as recently as 2019, after an incident of abuse directed at black Manchester City and England player Raheem Sterling was caught on video.¹²⁶ Sterling was the subject of racist abuse and intense media scrutiny because of a tattoo honoring his father.¹²⁷ The tattoo depicts a rifle, as his father was shot and killed in Jamaica when Sterling was young. The abuse prompted a swift response and

¹²³ Harris, John, *Britpop: Cool Britannia and the Spectacular Demise of English Rock*. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004). 161-162.

¹²⁴ Onuora, *Pitch Black*, 88.

¹²⁵ "Chelsea demand end to racist abuse of Grant," *World Soccer*, October 1, 2007. <https://www.worldsoccer.com/news/chelsea-demand-end-to-racist-abuse-of-grant-146632>

¹²⁶ "Raheem Sterling: Chelsea fan banned for life for 'racially abusive language' in Man City game," *BBC*, July 30, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/49161781>

¹²⁷ "Raheem Sterling: How speaking out on racism has helped make him a role model," *BBC Sport*, May 16, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/48286333>

condemnations from the FA, Premier League, and Chelsea, as well as a life ban from Stamford Bridge for the perpetrator.¹²⁸ Condemnations and life bans for racist abuse became the standard in the Premier League. This was a welcome change to the police protected far-right displays of the 1970s and 1980s, but showed the limitations of policing football spaces as abuse continued its evolution into online forms.

There was clear value for the Premier League clubs to create safer football environments, rooted in the interest of commercial and footballing success. Globalization and multiculturalism took off as concepts at big clubs like Arsenal because of the attraction foreign players and managers brought when integrated into the English game. A league that for a century fielded almost entirely British or Irish players suddenly had the financial structures and resources to fund moves for players of all nationalities. This was especially relevant to clubs competing with Manchester United at the top. In his article “Soccer Goes Glocal” sociologist Richard Giulianotti observed in the early 2000s the cultural changes within clubs themselves, bringing in foreign managers with different tactical philosophies, but also changing dietary and training expectations.¹²⁹ Like Wenger did at Arsenal, clubs around the Premier League ended traditional English drinking culture within their squads and improved player conditioning based on foreign diet and training methods.

Because of its high social visibility, football played an important role in highlighting the excesses of British racism in a public forum for all to see.¹³⁰ Onuora’s

¹²⁸ “Raheem Sterling: How speaking out on racism has helped make him a role model,” *BBC Sport*, May 16, 2019.

¹²⁹ Giulianotti, Richard. “Soccer Goes Glocal,” *Foreign Policy*, Jul.-Aug. 2002, No. 131, 82-83.

¹³⁰ Onuora, *Pitch Black*, 21.

analysis focuses on England specifically, but in the Premier League era the issue of English racism was then a part of an increasingly multicultural realm. As such a constant element of the nation's most beloved sport, racism could no longer be ignored by British society. The result was a uniform and widespread response from clubs and the governing bodies in an effort to expel racist abuse from football grounds. Black footballers became iconic members of the England national team, and team mainstays like the aforementioned Wright, Paul Ince, and Sol Campbell among others helped usher in an era in which multiple black players featured in the national side for the first time in its history.¹³¹ In *The Changing Face of Football* Sociologists Les Back, Tim Crabbe, and John Solomos study the new age of multiculturalism in English football, suggesting that the greater integration of football led to solidarity both on and off the pitch. Sharing a dressing room was, for Ian Wright, the biggest part of his integration into a predominantly white squad at Crystal Palace early in his career. Something as simple as exchanging knowledge about care and toiletry products, exchanging banter, and the ability to "share our stuff" between teammates helped to create a functional and diverse team of players.¹³² The sort of atmosphere within teams like Crystal Palace and Arsenal became more common throughout the 1990s, and inspired closer analysis of the role football had in an increasingly more diverse Europe.

Globalization and multiculturalism, terms used more frequently in the 1990s and 2000s, were also used in football discourse concerning European leagues and competitions. Multiculturalism and football have been a subject of academic discourse

¹³¹ Back, Les, Tim Crabbe, and John Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football*, (Oxford: Berg, 2001). 234.

¹³² Back, Crabbe, and Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football*. 152-153.

since the 1990s, and sociologists and historians alike have taken great interest in the complexities of race and national identity in sport. They saw England as an interesting case study because of its status as a premier footballing country, a former imperial metropole, and a frequent destination for foreign players outside of former colonies and imperial holdings. The arrival of migrants from former imperial holdings intensely diversified the population of western Europe in the twentieth century, and it has been shown that these migration patterns have affected the footballing landscape in these metropolises as well.

Laurent Dubois' *Soccer Empire* was not a study of England, but examined a similar issue within French football and politics. The primary subjects are Zinedine Zidane and Lilian Thuram, children of migrant families and veteran leaders of the French National Football Team during their most successful period. They were both raised in France and able to claim French nationality, but as they and other children of immigrants emerged in the French team they became the subject of racist and islamophobic abuse and criticism from Jean-Marie Le Pen and his burgeoning far-right French National Front political party. However, he also argues that the new generation of diverse French footballers helped to force public discourse of pressing issues of France's imperial legacy and modern racism and xenophobia, and states that these helped shape the present political reality of France.¹³³ Dubois' analysis of football as an "inescapable" institution that is "as real as any government or church" is precisely the framework that defined the modern game.¹³⁴ It was an institution of people, a vessel of publicly shared emotions and

¹³³ Dubois, Laurent, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2010. 19.

¹³⁴ Dubois, *Soccer Empire*. 21.

values expressed beyond the realm of spectator control that nonetheless captured both their financial and personal investment. Its ability to mobilize people made it an interesting force for social change in fights against racism and nationalism while also bearing the problems and manifestations of such social divisions.

Another side effect of expanded diversity was the accumulation of talent in the Premier League and other European leagues from foreign continents. Players who once stayed and played within respective home nations left for Europe with greater regularity from the 1990s on. South American, African, and Asian domestic leagues regularly saw their top talent emigrate to Western Europe because of the accumulation of capital by those leagues and clubs. Economist and Globalization academic Branko Milanovic wrote about this phenomenon in the European game, and argued that while it increased the quality of football played it also increased economic inequality.¹³⁵ African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Cote D'Ivoire have seen numerous players reach the heights of the club game in the 21st century at European clubs, and though their national teams have improved as well the commercial benefits have not trickled down equally.¹³⁶ Even traditional footballing powerhouses such as Brazil and Argentina have witnessed their internal football infrastructures and club game crumble as their top talent is lured away to Europe. Lionel Messi, Argentina's latest all-time great player, has played his entire club career at Barcelona, moving to the country when he was just 13 years old to continue his development. When the development and maturation of players in this way is entirely relocated to Europe it makes the transfer fee paid to the domestic clubs smaller, and

¹³⁵ Milanovic, Branko, "Globalization and goals: does soccer show the way?" Review of International Political Economy, Vol. 12, no. 5. 843-844. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25124053>

¹³⁶ Branko, "Globalization and goals," 844.

means there are no seasons spent by the player playing professionally in their country of origin. This happening with greater regularity means the wealth generated by these talents circulate almost entirely within the top European leagues with no one but the national team left to prosper in the countries of origin.

The accumulation of foreign talent in Western Europe was an issue that transcended efforts to combat racism at local levels, and was indicative of a looming history of Imperialism. As Dubois discussed in *Soccer Empire*, European nations like France had populations that reflected all sorts of diasporas, but naturalized and French-born citizenship gave many children of migrant families the right to French citizenship. When it came to footballers, the national team began to reflect these diasporas.¹³⁷ The wealth of the game accumulated in Europe made it more beneficial for these footballers to further their trade in these countries. The issue of financial fairness and the massive wealth that European countries accumulated prompted economic solutions in the game, which focused on the big clubs such as England's Big Six. Governing bodies such as FIFA and UEFA tried to implement Financial Fair Play regulations to redistribute the massive capital amassed by the biggest clubs across Europe as well as prevent bankruptcy and overspending at smaller clubs, but these had only a minimal effect. The regulations also prompted discussion of a European Super League between the rich clubs that required only legacy and mass appeal for qualification, rather than the merit-based qualification of league position and cup success for UEFA competitions.¹³⁸ This

¹³⁷ Dubois, *Soccer Empire*, 86.

¹³⁸ Gill Clark, "Florentino Perez calls for a European Super League," *Goal.com*, July 5, 2009. <https://www.goal.com/en/news/9/english-football/2009/07/05/1364746/florentino-perez-calls-for-a-european-super-league>

increased wealth gap gave these clubs unprecedented leverage over the rest of the game, including in some cases their own football communities.

Anti-Racism In Action

The reasons for a shift toward more social justice principles are clearer when examining the English game, where commercial interests in the Premier League era coincided with international marketability and the increased protection of black and foreign players. Historian Brett Bebbler argued this in *Violence and Racism in football*, suggesting that both the Tory and Labour parties maintained an interest in quelling spectator violence for the sake of expanding economic possibilities within the sport industry.¹³⁹ Many of the Premier League's diverse cast of superstars welcomed their visibility and embraced tough, rebel-like personae. Though the commercial motivation meant glossing over certain problems with racism in football and society, the Premier League made England an unavoidably diverse football environment.

Football was always a sport driven by its intense and loyal fanbases and the communities built around them, but as was explored in the previous chapter there was a considerable amount of hostility generated between those communities. Though hooliganism was on the decline by the mid-1990s the issue of fan behavior towards players and inside and outside of stadiums continued to be a problem in English football. A 2020 study by football anti-racism organization and Premier League partner group

A development after the start of this project was the actual announcement of a European Super League in April, 2021. It lasted about 72 hours before the anger of the entire sport persuaded most of the owners and chairmen of 12 very rich clubs to abandon the Super League. At the time that this footnote is being written only Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, and Juventus remain committed to the project, and they are supposedly prepared to hold the 9 other clubs to the Super League agreement they signed on to.

¹³⁹ Bebbler, Brett, *Violence and Racism in Football*, (Pickering & Chatto Publishers: London, 2012), 231.

Kick It Out indicated that 43% of Premier League players surveyed were victims of targeted abuse.¹⁴⁰ The study indicated abuse had shifted out of football spaces and towards an online setting, but interactions between fans and players at football grounds were the first area where fan racism was addressed in the Premier League era. Stadiums were once burdened with a toxic atmosphere of chants with slurs, monkey noises, and objects thrown towards the pitch. Greater responsibility was taken after the creation of the Premier League in identifying abusers and banning them from future matches as well as increasing security presence and barriers around the border between the pitch and the stands. Efforts to protect players in the Premier League era indicate a general understanding of the danger presented by the English fan. This is understandable given the context of the early Premier League era, with the game only recently removed from the Heysel Stadium Disaster and clashes with police under Thatcher's government and at international competitions. The players themselves were all too aware of the ugliness of some supporters, and players felt that Cantona's kick out at one such fan was perhaps a long time coming.

Cantona's violent actions in reaction to an abusive fan embodied the feelings that many players harbored, particularly against hooligans who made the matchday about themselves by inciting conflict with police, stadium officials, players, or other hooligans and troublemakers. In Rob Smyth's brief history of the incident, written for *The Guardian*, he cited evidence of widespread, albeit private, support for Cantona among other Premier League players. Arsenal striker Ian Wright, who experienced racist abuse

¹⁴⁰ Kick It Out, "AI Research Study: Online Abuse and Project Restart," 1.

from fans throughout his career, was reportedly “jealous” of Cantona. Even TV presenter Nick Hancock, an “Anyone but United” hard-man, claimed it was “comfortably the best thing that’s happened this season.”¹⁴¹ This narrative juxtaposed a sensationalist response in tabloids, often sources of racist and xenophobic discourse themselves. *The Daily Mirror* headline read: “The Shame of Cantona: Is this the end for the madman?”¹⁴²

However, other press outlets, such as *The Independent* came to Cantona’s defense as well. Days after the incident, amid a storm of sensational tabloid pieces and outrageous eye-catching headlines, reporter Richard Williams wrote, somewhat in jest, that Cantona’s only fault was to stop his attack on Simmons.¹⁴³ The press was clearly more divided on the issue, but the more thoughtful approaches of journalists such as Williams more reflected the feelings of players in regard to hooligans. The “jealousy” of Ian Wright reflected the frustrations players had with supporters like Simmons, and following the incident it was revealed why. As part of the furore, more about Simmons’ own character was investigated. Simmons was revealed to have been a known agitator as a football spectator, and had some ties to neo-Nazi British nationalist groups.¹⁴⁴ He and many other football fans throughout the country directed abuse freely at players, something that at the time was seen as a test of will for professionals who wanted to

¹⁴¹ Rob Smyth, “Eric Cantona and ‘the hooligan’: The Impact of the Kung-Fu Kick 25 Years On,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/jan/25/eric-cantona-kung-fu-kick-hooligan-25-years-later> (December 6, 2020)

¹⁴² Image, “Cantona, THAT kung-fu kick & me: 20 years on, Mike Walters recalls an astonishing night at Selhurst Park,” *The Daily Mirror*, January 24, 2015. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/cantona-kung-fu-kick--me-5034527>

¹⁴³ Richard Williams, “A Martyr to his Own Myth,” *The Independent*, January 29, 1995, <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/a-martyr-to-his-own-myth-football-1570233.html> (December 10, 2020)

¹⁴⁴ Auclair, *Cantona*, 746.

perform at the highest level in England. It was later recognized for its potential dangers to players and fans alike, but the issue of combating fan conflict is one which the football world was historically insufficient in dealing with. Though there was no way Cantona could have known his soon to be victim was cut from such despicable cloth, the assumption of racism and xenophobia from English fans was a pretty safe one from footballers. This is largely because for a long time far-right, actively racist and hostile groups were allowed to participate in football grounds by police while anti-racist and anti-fascist groups were.¹⁴⁵ The presence of these groups expanded crowd hostility to a level that was less acceptable in the Premier League era, and that is where the issue of safety in football spaces turned next. Governing bodies, the Premier League, clubs, players, and activists struggled to stay on the same page in the campaigns against racism, but for the most part football grounds were cleansed of far-right organizations acting openly, an effort aided by the incidents that shed light on them.

Cantona's intolerance of the abuse raised a new question about where exactly the line that should not be crossed is in regards to supporters and player abuse. As football journalist and Cantona biographer Phillippe Auclair pointed out, it was quite lucky for Cantona that Simmons wound up being an abhorrent person with a criminal record for assaulting immigrants, as it was Cantona's own decision to leap over the barrier and attack the fan spouting abuse.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, Simmons' far-right background gave the incident's legacy a different spin. Rather than being remembered for its ugliness the kick

¹⁴⁵ Onuora, *Pitch Black*, 235.

¹⁴⁶ Phillippe Auclair, *Cantona*, 748.

actually generated some legacy of heroism for Cantona. Smyth's piece for *The Guardian* demonstrates this well:

"The act Cantona perpetrated at Selhurst Park might have been his most worthwhile of all. It was the most important moment in a relationship between players and fans so enduring and spiritual as to be almost without comparison. He was already a United legend. On 25 January 1995, he became immortal."¹⁴⁷

Smyth's account reflects well the role the incident had in Cantona's legacy, and for United fans in particular his attack against Simmons specifically was celebrated. One Manchester United fanzine co-opted the image of Cantona kicking Simmons with a "Let's kick racism out of football" tag, with special emphasis on the word "kick."¹⁴⁸ This was one of several instances of solidarity from Manchester United fans for Cantona, who was wholeheartedly embraced. His French heritage was incorporated into imagery on flags and scarves, and their "Ooh Aah Cantona" chant utilized the tune of La Marseillaise.¹⁴⁹ Though this was not universally the case for foreign players, the embrace of Cantona by United supporters after the incident especially was telling of the respect that a powerful personality could command in the English game. The show of support by Manchester United fans similarly shows a level of commitment to protecting a foreign player that likely would not have occurred in the 1980s. It is significant that Cantona both

¹⁴⁷ Smyth, "Eric Cantona and 'the hooligan'," *The Guardian*.

¹⁴⁸ Image, "When Cantona Kicked That Racist..." *The Republik of Mancunia*.
<https://therepublikofmancunia.com/when-cantona-kicked-that-racist-18-years-later/>

¹⁴⁹ "Ooh Aah Cantona," *Fanchants*, <https://www.fanchants.com/football-songs/manchester-united-chants/ooh-aah-cantona/>

survived the controversy and received support at all given the xenophobic hostility present in the game just a few years earlier.

Intolerance of abuse was evident at other clubs as well, a trend that developed in response to the fact that certain club grounds and stadiums became specifically notorious for racist abuse. Certain clubs developed reputations for the uncontrolled racist behavior of their fanbase, notably Chelsea, Leeds United, West Ham United, Newcastle United, and Millwall, and these expressions manifested in play as well in the form of racist remarks, body checks, and unnecessarily aggressive challenges.¹⁵⁰ In this way, the identity of the club appeared to have taken on an element of racism, expressed in songs and chants, in abuse directed at players, in criticisms of players, in hate mail, and by the club's players on the pitch. Racism was absolutely not exclusive to specific clubs, but there were clubs whose identity fostered and maintained racism as part of its identity that remains even in the present. It took the action of anti-racist groups of supporters to begin the cleanup, as outside authorities provided little by way of assistance in preventing far-right racist groups of supporters from organizing and causing trouble at football matches.¹⁵¹

In the 1980s a group of anti-racist and anti-fascist Leeds United supporters took action against the presence of far-right neo-Nazis, which had increased to a frightening level in the late 1970s. Initially the local police were hostile towards the anti-racists, claiming that their presence would lead to violence at Leeds' Elland Road stadium.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Onuora, *Pitch Black*, 87-88.

¹⁵¹ Onuora, *Pitch Black*, 236.

¹⁵² Onuora, *Pitch Black*, 236.

The group eventually helped ban the far-right groups and Nazi imagery from Elland Road stadium through publication of a report that documented numerous cases of violence by these groups in the community and outside football grounds.¹⁵³ The group, named “Leeds Fans United Against Racism and Facism,” produced a dossier of evidence of racist violence on part of neo-Nazi groups gathered largely from local newspaper clippings.¹⁵⁴ Despite the opposition this group of supporters received from local police, they were effective in lobbying for change within the club. The report exposed these groups to the public eye more than ever, and the club ownership group responded by banning these groups and individual members from the ground. Through these efforts, Elland Road’s national reputation as an openly hostile ground for black footballers started to change.

Despite the success of efforts by fan activists and the government to combat fan violence, the Cantona incident was also emblematic of the survival of aggressive xenophobic fan behavior outside of a more organized form. For all the progress that had been made in English Football coming out of the 1980s, Richard Williams argued that the true nature of the fan had not yet changed. “It isn’t funny or charming, or even traditional. It’s the distilled essence of hatred,” Williams wrote of crowd hissing and jeering, “and a reminder that the existence of all-seater grandstands with decent lavatories doesn’t guarantee a mass conversion to the higher emotions.”¹⁵⁵ Football supporters had come a long way from the violence and disorder of previous decades, but their behavior was still in many ways a hindrance to the game. Football spaces became cleaner and more

¹⁵³ Onuora, *Pitch Black*, 237-238.

¹⁵⁴ Rob Conlon, “Leeds United, racism, and the fanzine which forced change at Elland Road,” *Planet Football*, September 27, 2017. <https://www.planetfootball.com/in-depth/leeds-united-racism-fanzine-forced-change-elland-road/>

¹⁵⁵ Williams, “A Martyr to his Own Myth.”

comfortable for the fan experience than ever before in the top flight, and racism in football was largely pushed into new spaces of expression.

The endurance of Cantona throughout the controversy also indicated that players that endured abuse with a certain edginess and attitude, could be quite likeable and marketable in the Premier League era. It was a badge of honor for some, and would further endear them to members of their increasingly global audience. Nike, a booming American sporting apparel brand because of black basketball superstar Michael Jordan's celebrity in the 1990s, decided to capitalize on the character of Cantona and Ian Wright. Nike took a bolder, open minded approach to its marketing in Europe by embracing characters that might have been deemed too controversial, and started in England with Wright and Cantona. For Ian Wright, Nike embraced the arrogance of a goalscorer, putting him on billboards with a sly slogan that read: "Behind every great goalkeeper there's a ball from Ian Wright."¹⁵⁶ One similar advert with Cantona quipped: "66 was a great year for English football. . . Eric was born."¹⁵⁷ With 1966 being the year of England's only World Cup victory, and the only World Cup hosted on English soil, this slogan embraced the potential controversy with its message. The media swarm around Cantona post-Kung Fu kick brought some negativity to the Frenchman's reputation, but also fueled the interest in him. Both Cantona and Wright embraced the hate they received, and for Cantona in particular it became a specific part in his legend. They were

¹⁵⁶ *Planet Football*, "Seven Classic Nike Football Billboards," March 1, 2019.
<https://www.planetfootball.com/quick-reads/seven-classic-nike-football-billboards-eric-cantona-arsenal-paolo-maldini/>

¹⁵⁷ *Planet Football*, "Seven Classic Nike Football Billboards," March 1, 2019.
<https://www.planetfootball.com/quick-reads/seven-classic-nike-football-billboards-eric-cantona-arsenal-paolo-maldini/>

players with reputations as rebels, Cantona especially, and their embrace of this persona empowered their legacy as enigmatic celebrities.

Cantona never hid his remarkable personality from the public eye, and even a moment in which he detested the attention of the press, he quipped what became a timeless quote in sport. His press conference following the incident became legendary in its own right as he both attacked and embraced the obsession with a short but philosophical statement: “When the seagulls. . . follow the trawler. . . It is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea. Thank you.”¹⁵⁸ The media, or the seagulls, were predictably unsatisfied, but the villain label was no longer what it used to be. Controversy had its own appeal, as did the edge and attitude towards aggressive fans that Cantona and Wright both expressed. The xenophobia present in the attacks directed at foreign players was still very much a part of the English game, but the ugliness of it was much more of a turn off than it would have been considered before. The reality now was that non-white players were becoming fan favorites, and the draw of the Premier League only increased overseas. The appreciation of greatness and the new and exciting talent that the Premier League drew in produced a football spectacle the likes of which English fans had never seen before, and the market continued to respond. By promoting and sponsoring these players, enlisting them in adverts, and embracing their combative attitude, companies and clubs bet on profits that consciousness in the game had shifted, and were proven to be right. It should be noted however, that the main motivation in this

¹⁵⁸ Sky Sports Retro, "When the seagulls follow the trawler" - Eric Cantona's bizarre press conference," YouTube Video, 0:29, April 27, 2020.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbwV5XX6phU&ab_channel=SkySportsRetro

was profit, and the explicit connection between anti-racism and marketing made money an undeniable factor in this sort of activism.

Foreign and black players endeared themselves to fanbases, but there emerged interesting issues of racism in the form of well-intentioned slur use in songs as a show of affection. Sociologists studied this subject as English football in the context of English nationalism, arguing that forms of casual racism were thrown about often as a way of taunting and reducing people to their identity and/or culture, including foreigners, black players and fans, and even regional groups within England.¹⁵⁹ Rivalries between cities and towns manifested in matches between clubs upped the volume on ugly chants and abuse, showing the tribalism that still existed between communities within England let alone foreign groups in the 1990s.¹⁶⁰ The tribalism between clubs remained, but as was shown in the previous chapter the level of hooliganism, rioting, and supporter conflict had declined dramatically since the 1980s.¹⁶¹ As black players became more visible than ever in the Premier League era the intersection between sport, money, and identity became more and more complex. This was the flip side of anti-racist ad campaigns, resulting in a somewhat vague message about racism. One Nike billboard featuring black England striker Les Ferdinand alongside Cantona read: “What do you see? A black man, a Frenchman, or a footballer? Why argue about the differences? I’d rather just play football.”¹⁶² This commodification of the issue at hand accomplished very little in regard

¹⁵⁹ Back, Crabbe, and Solomos, *Changing Face of Football*, 60-61.

¹⁶⁰ Back, Crabbe, and Solomos, *Changing Face of Football*, 59.

¹⁶¹ UK Government, “Football-related arrests statistics, England and Wales, 1984 to 1985 season to 1999 to 2000 season” <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-statistics-england-and-wales-1984-to-1985-through-to-1999-to-2000> (March 24, 2021)

¹⁶² Back, Crabbe, and Solomos, *Changing Face of Football*, 210.

to racism, and in a way suggested that just shutting up and playing the sport was the point. The intention was there, portraying a black and a foreign player together in defiance of racism, but the slogan said more about selling the sport than it did about the meaning of putting those players together.

Sociologist Adam Brown published an article alongside other football sociologists Tim Crabbe and Gavin Mellor concerning the observed role of football clubs in community and social issues. They argued that in the 1990s a shift began within clubs towards greater community involvement and advancement of social issues.¹⁶³ Racism in particular became a widely discussed issue in the football community at the time, and groups such as Kick It Out and the Premier League's own anti-racism campaigns were unanimously supported by clubs. It is a show of solidarity not only with the increasingly diverse and global supporters' communities, but also a defense of footballers themselves. The article describes the recognition of "ambivalence" and its effect on "marketing and regeneration through the aesthetic of football."¹⁶⁴ It is interesting to see football analyzed this way, as a capitalist enterprise taking public stances on social issues. In fact, it was something which club sponsors were increasingly insistent on, which again indicates the financial motivation evident in decision-making for football clubs. They concluded that a thorough "re-imagining of the football and community issue" was required in the modern age of their increasingly more political existence as communal entities.¹⁶⁵ The article was written in 2006 as the relationship between fans and clubs became increasingly reduced

¹⁶³ Brown, Adam, Tim Crabbe, and Gavin Mellor, "English Professional Football and its Communities," *International Review of Modern Sociology*, Autumn 2006, Vol. 32, No. 2. 159.

¹⁶⁴ Brown, Crabbe, and Mellor, "English Professional Football And Its Communities," 175.

¹⁶⁵ Brown, Crabbe, and Mellor, "English Professional Football And Its Communities." 176.

at the management level, with owners taking a more active role in running the club as a business without the input of supporters' trusts. The idea of community is important in football, and maintenance of that communal relationship with fans has been a priority for clubs from a public relations perspective, but actions do not always indicate that has been the case in other areas. The anti-racism social movements over the years varied in success, and it appeared that the involvement of clubs helped to reduce racism in football atmospheres. Kick It Out shifted its focus to the persistent problem outside of football grounds, where the authority of the leagues, clubs, and even the police was ineffective.¹⁶⁶

But while racism at football grounds quieted, the digital age offered a new and more complicated platform for abuse: the internet. Football clubs and fan communities took full advantage of the new medium for communication. Fan blogs and message boards were set up as an evolution of fanzines, and were accessible to a much wider audience across the globe. Social media contributed to this as well, with Facebook groups and Twitter communities linked together on platforms for largely uncensored expression of opinions, ideas, and takes. Racism and censorship of it became less personal in online forums, and though it was removed from actual football spaces the conversation has since shifted to how cyber targeting of players can be combated successfully. A study of racism in online football forums uncovered a litany of racist and islamophobic comments about players posted and left unedited and unremoved.¹⁶⁷ Kick it Out representatives endorsed increased methods of tracing online accounts to persons hiding behind them, and there

¹⁶⁶ “#STOPONLINEABUSE,” *Kick It Out*, <https://www.kickitout.org/news/stoponlineabuse>

¹⁶⁷ Cleland, Jamie. 2019. “Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards: How Social Media Has Added a New Dimension to Racist Discourse in English Football,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*. 38, no. 5, October, 2014, 428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723513499922>.

have been cases of people being tracked down and charged for racist abuse on these platforms, but when actual persons behind accounts reside overseas it's impossible to track down and charge them without the cooperation of multiple law enforcement agencies and social media companies across the world.¹⁶⁸ The inaction of internet companies to reveal the identity and information of users comes with its own enforcement problems and moral questions about internet privacy, but it became a central issue to combating racism on new age platforms.¹⁶⁹

This fits the narrative of academics of the subject, who showed that racism in football spaces adapted to live outside of the spotlight. In *Pitch Black*, Onuora argued that there was significant improvement in the attitude of English crowds towards black players in the decades between the breakthrough of black players in the first division in the 1970s and the regularity of black English and foreign players in the Premier League in the 21st century.¹⁷⁰ Overt racism was largely removed from English football grounds, and the Premier League era of money brought greater wealth to both the development of black English players and the investment in foreign talent.¹⁷¹ Italy and Spain had previously dominated the market for foreign players because of the money that it offered, but the economic growth of the Premier League and heightened level of play among its

¹⁶⁸ Eoin Connolly, "UK sport's social media boycott and beating online hate speech," *SportsPro Media*, May 20, 2021. <https://www.sportspromedia.com/interviews/kick-it-out-sanjay-bhandari-interview-uk-sports-media-social-boycott-racism>

¹⁶⁹ Eoin Connolly, "UK sport's social media boycott and beating online hate speech," *SportsPro Media*.

¹⁷⁰ Onuora, Emy, *Pitch Black*, (London: Bite Back Publishing, 2015). 22-23.

¹⁷¹ Storey, David, "Football, place and migration: Foreign Footballers in the FA Premier League," *Geography*, Vol. 96, no. 2, 2011, 92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41320340>
By the 2009/10 season nearly half of English clubs had at least 10 players signed from outside the United Kingdom. Three clubs had at least 20 players from outside the UK, making up over a third of the squad. These numbers are a huge change from 20 years earlier, signifying the opening of the English game to foreign players and managers.

top clubs made England the desired destination for many international stars of the game. Players like Dennis Bergkamp, David Ginola, and Thierry Henry among many others arrived from top European sides in favor of playing for Premier League challengers.

The Premier League maintained a strong anti-racism stance, but as was often the case the manifestation of that policy through action was complicated by authority, crowd policing methods, and the role of clubs and supporters groups in combating racist acts. However, the behavior of players experiencing abuse from fans changed dramatically, from hesitant to bold, and in many cases those players became outspoken activists promoting social movements against racism. Cantona and Wright were not unique cases of players adding an edge to their off-the pitch personalities, and brands like Nike continued to consciously sign athletes who push social justice narratives. Black England stars Marcus Rashford and Jadon Sancho, vocal proponents of the Black Lives Matter movement, are both poster boys for Nike's football/soccer brands, signed in tandem as opposed to the normal Nike method of signing multiple players to shoe and apparel deals.¹⁷² As they did with American athletes LeBron James and Colin Kaepernick in the United States, Nike looked overseas for athletes that are active and vocal in social justice and politics. The call for such personalities unfortunately continued, but does so with support from clubs and the Premier League in message more so than action. There was obvious support for anti-racism campaigns from a public relations and economic point of view because of the violence and hooliganism embedded in the racism that many

¹⁷² Tifo Football and The Athletic, "Nike's Disappearing Boot Deals," YouTube Video, May 10, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1wvKDn3Nzo&ab_channel=TifoFootball

supporters' groups brought to the game, and the added incentive of protecting minority and foreign players from abuse led to an expansion of anti-racism efforts.

The Premier League was an accessible product across the world, and long maintained an anti-racist message as part of its inclusivity. Partnerships with Kick It Out, and campaigns such as No Room For Racism were well-funded and publicized projects, but there were still problems which persisted into the twenty-first century.¹⁷³ The multicultural transformation of the Premier League era clearly aided in the fight against racism in English football, and the Premier League created extensive policy and procedure for reporting racism in football grounds and on the internet.¹⁷⁴ The push towards more accessible and safe environments at football grounds helped turn English football into a diverse, hybrid game which featured some of the brightest minds in the sport from around the world. Top foreign players were brought into the league at higher rates than ever before, black English players were regulars for clubs as well as the England national team, and racism in all its forms decreased at football grounds. The decrease in volume of football-related arrests over time indicated better behavior on the part of fans as well, even with incidents such as Cantona's.¹⁷⁵ Xenophobic sentiments never fully went away however, and the decrease in incidents within football grounds did not translate to the removal of racism and xenophobia entirely. Premier League teams enhanced their football with more diverse squad and coaching staffs going into the

¹⁷³ "No Room For Racism," *Premier League*.

¹⁷⁴ "No Room For Racism," *Premier League*.

¹⁷⁵ "Football-related arrests statistics, England and Wales, 1984 to 1985 season to 1999 to 2000 season" <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-statistics-england-and-wales-1984-to-1985-through-to-1999-to-2000>

twenty-first century, and abuse continued as well despite its weakened and dispersed voice.

Conclusion

There was a lot of animosity within football, whether it be part of the actual game or not, and it boiled over in new ways in the Premier League era. In order to continue creating a marketable product the Premier League adapted in many ways to create safer environments for its players and fans, and pushed out some very real and ugly parts of English society in the process. An influx of foreign talent and the emergence of a talented generation of black Britons forced the league and its clubs to be more active in forcing social change and combating racism in football areas. Government legislation, discussed in the previous chapter, enforced harsher punishment for egregious hate crimes, but this chapter has shown there were also more cultural evolutions of anti-racist campaigning. Football partner anti-racist campaigns emerged, social media and online forums became a new battleground of racist discourse, and players themselves embraced edginess and defiance in the face of xenophobic abuse. The idea of a football community became harnessed in a more global fashion, incorporating values of openness as the Premier League further marketed itself as a global sporting phenomenon. However, the money that drove this unprecedented growth also complicated the relationships within football communities across England. Fanbases were vocal about their loss of agency within their clubs as foreign investment and consolidated control by owners became more commonplace. The next chapter will explore this case specifically, and the way the most successful club in Premier League history and its community grappled with an identity crisis in the new millennium.

CHAPTER IV – NAME ON THE TROPHY: MANCHESTER UNITED AND THE MODERN CLUB

“Can Manchester United score, they *always* score.”¹⁷⁶ Clive Tyldsley’s words, heard across the world, echoed the reputation that the red half of Manchester had grown accustomed to over an already memorable 1998/99 season. They were on the verge of winning a historic treble of the Premier League, FA Cup and UEFA Champions League titles in the same season, but trailed 1-0 to German champions Bayern Munich in the minutes of the UEFA Champions League final. Tyldsley, his co-commentator and former Manchester United manager Ron Atkinson, and the rest of the footballing world watched on as David Beckham lined up a corner kick for a last ditch comeback effort. Beckham’s targets included all ten of his teammates, with the entire defense and goalkeeper forward in an effort to equalize. The ball bounced around a chaotic 18-yard box, which contained nearly every player on the pitch, before finding its way to Ryan Giggs. He sent in a weak shot, which was steered in by Teddy Sheringham. “Name on the trophy!” Tyldsley shouted. “Teddy Sheringham, with thirty seconds of added time played, has equalized for Manchester United, they are still in the European Cup!”¹⁷⁷

The feeling, as described by a number of players, was that they would now go to extra time with the momentum.¹⁷⁸ They had trailed from the sixth minute of the game, and struggled to find scoring chances with their two key central midfielders missing the final through suspension, but Ferguson’s substitutions and instructions had done the job.

¹⁷⁶ Clive Tyldsley, “Manchester United vs. Bayern Munich,” ITV, Barcelona, Spain: ITV, May 26, 1999.

¹⁷⁷ Tyldsley, “Manchester United vs. Bayern Munich,” ITV.

¹⁷⁸ Leo Pearlman, “The Class of 92.” DVD. Directed by Ben and Gabe Turner. (London: F73 Productions, 2013).

In typical fashion they won late chances, and were rewarded with an equalizer in the first minute of stoppage time. The players prepared themselves for the extra time period of 30 minutes that would follow if the teams were still level after the full 90 minutes.

However, after the restart, the ball was pushed up the field quickly again, and United's Norwegian forward Ole Gunnar Solskjaer won a second corner in the final minute of stoppage time. Beckham again delivered a bending cross towards the Bayern goal, goalscorer Teddy Sheringham gave it a flick on header towards the foot of Solskjaer, who smashed it past Bayern goalkeeper Oliver Kahn to give Manchester United an unbelievable win at the death.

"And Solskjaer has won it!," yelled Tyldsley. "Manchester United have reached the promised land!" Tyldsley's voice indicated both his surprise and perhaps even joy over what had unfolded. "Ole Solskjaer. . . the two substitutes have scored the two goals in stoppage time, and the treble looms large!"¹⁷⁹

Manchester United's incredible late comeback win left Bayern Munich stunned, and the players could hardly stand back up to kick the ball off again. With such little time remaining there wasn't much point anyway, and the referee soon blew the final whistle, meaning that for the first time since 1968 Manchester United were the champions of Europe. The club had had a long and emotional relationship with the UEFA Champions League, and waited just over thirty years before they won it a second time. A plane crash in 1958 saw much of the team tragically lost, but the revival of the club under manager Sir Matt Busby, the story of he and Sir Bobby Charlton recovering to lead the team to

¹⁷⁹ Tyldsley, "Manchester United vs. Bayern Munich," ITV.

European glory, and the emergence of another generation of academy players created a mythos around the club that laid the foundation for its storied legacy. Like that first European victory in 1968, the United squad in 1999 featured numerous academy products, players who grew up within the club system and into the first team. The 1999 side also faced a difficult run of fixtures against Europe's best on the way to the final, being matched against former European champions such as Bayern Munich, FC Barcelona, Inter Milan, and Juventus on the way to winning the historic trophy. It was emblematic of the difficult journey back to this stage it had been for Manchester United, who were relatively absent from the winner's stage during the 1970s and 1980s. The Treble closed out the 1990s in style, and cemented their status as one of the premier sporting franchises in the world going into the twenty-first century. The quest for European glory was emblematic of the club's status as one of the most successful clubs in English football, but also of the modern commercial interests that made the club one of the biggest brands in the world. The club's history was invaluable in growing their fanbase across the globe and, pushing for further success attracted more foreign supporters, players, and crucially investors.

The 1999 Treble was a feat that had never been achieved by any English club before, and none replicated it after. It gave an added layer of permanence to the mythos that surrounds Manchester United, and cemented their status as the dominant English club in the new Premier League era. While the never-say-die attitude and aura of the club certainly seemed to have been a part of their remarkable success in the 1990s, there is also a practical explanation for the club's conquest of the English game in this time. Manchester United were an exceptional success in the English game because of their

ability to capitalize on the opportunity of the Premier League era both on and off the pitch. The football mastery of the manager and players, the financial backing of the club, and the economic sustainability that football success brought in the 1990s helped turn the club into a global sporting superpower. United's riches made them well equipped to ascend to the top of the English game and become a global brand in the Premier League era of immense revenue. This is not to say that they were guaranteed the level of success that they achieved commercially or in football, but the opportunity came at a time when the club was ready to compete at a high level. However, that success attracted outside interest in the club, and a change in ownership upset an already teetering balance of power within the club that would exacerbate matters when the safety net of football mastery was removed. A forced takeover by American billionaire Malcolm Glazer angered supporters by stripping them of their small but influential stake in the club, and ushered in financially focused decision-makers with little knowledge of the sport.

The takeover highlighted a common issue among English fans, dealing with club owners whose primary interest was profiting from the club. There was an increased feeling of disconnect between the club and its local community, and the line between artificiality and genuineness became increasingly blurred when it came to club-sponsored content. The new owners divided the Manchester United fanbase with their approach to club management, and the criticisms of their lack of investment in the team was legitimized by a dip in form. Sir Alex Ferguson was a legendary figure at the club for a reason, and upon his retirement the club's footballing infrastructure collapsed. Multiple managers tried and failed to influence change under the Glazer ownership, but an answer presented itself in the form of a familiar face. They experimented with putting a former

club legend on the pitch in the manager's role, and realized a personification of the culture of nostalgia and legacy that was perpetuated in club media.

Though there is brief discussion of other clubs and forms of Premier League club ownership in this chapter, Manchester United is the primary focus because of its iconic status in the English game. I argue that Manchester United epitomized the Premier League era in multiple regards, growing as a global entity as it maintained success, accumulated wealth, and featured ongoing disputes between its supporters and ownership over issues of club culture, funding, and community representation. Furthermore, the club's unique approach to branding and self-actualization demonstrated the goals of the modern football club. Manchester United went to great efforts to preserve and promote its history and reputation as one of the biggest sporting clubs in the world, even when results on the pitch began to indicate otherwise.

Manchester United and Relationships between Clubs and Supporters in the Premier League Era

There were several reasons for Manchester United's storied rise on and off the pitch. First and foremost, Manchester United were a well-run football club under the management of Sir Alex Ferguson. After his appointment in 1986 Ferguson "tripled" the scouting system at Manchester United, placing a particular focus on the Greater Manchester area as to secure the future services of the brightest young Mancunian talents.¹⁸⁰ In addition to this, the club was smarter about transfers than it had been before Ferguson. Club owner and Chairman Martin Edwards notably splurged on players and

¹⁸⁰ Class of 92

club expenses in the 1970s and 1980s while consolidating his ownership of the club. He became a bit more conservative in order to recoup his losses, but gave greater trust to Ferguson in regards to negotiating for and bringing in new players. The result was resounding success on the pitch, which made the club a desirable destination for some of the top players in the game.

Another factor in Manchester United's emergence was money. As was discussed in the first chapter, owner and club chairman Martin Edwards was one of the leaders in the formation of the Premier League, teaming up with chairman and board members from other big clubs in an effort to create a new elite tier of the English league system that was controlled by the clubs themselves. The money that the Premier League brought in from television was a substantial boost to clubs, and with Manchester United winning the Premier League title in each of the competition's first two seasons, they were also eligible for qualification to European competition, further boosting the club's international presence and revenue. Television revenue from the Premier League alone increased from £62 million to £357 million between 1995 and 2000, and finishing at or near the top of the table each season gave United a large share of profits in that time.¹⁸¹ Stefan Szymanski, author of *Soccernomics*, noted their ability to spend while expanding their revenue in the 1990s, which made them an exception to a long held trend of clubs needing to take a loss on revenue in order to get better.¹⁸² TV money from domestic and European competitions and the marketing of club memorabilia and merchandise through

¹⁸¹ Burdekin, Richard C. K., and Michael Franklin. "Transfer Spending in the English Premier League: The Haves and Have Nots." *National Institute Economic Review*, no. 232, 2015, R7.

¹⁸² Stefan Szymanski, "Why is Manchester United so successful?" *Business Strategy Review*, 48.

global apparel brands gave them the financial riches to pair with their footballing riches, which built a sense of invincibility and inevitably about the club.

Martin Edwards's family had owned Manchester United since the 1960s, and though his investment in the club came at a considerable personal cost it paid dividends for himself and the club with the arrival of success in the Premier League era. Edwards stood his ground against potential takeovers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and after supporting the formation of the Premier League was able to further fund squad moves to build on Ferguson's success.¹⁸³ It was a case of the rich getting richer for Manchester United, and the club responded by reinvesting the money into the squad. They offered higher wages and unprecedented transfer fees on top of the appeal of playing for a team that dominated the English game. Because of this, they were able to secure the services of top players from league rivals. Roy Keane from Nottingham Forest, Andy Cole from Newcastle United, Teddy Sheringham from Tottenham Hotspur, and Dwight Yorke from Aston Villa were four notable transfers who came from teams that were challenging Manchester United for trophies and they still sold to United anyway. They broke the British transfer fee record three times in the first decade of the Premier League, including twice in the span of one year.¹⁸⁴ This was indicative of the financial power and influence that the club had created for itself over the English game. However, the model of

¹⁸³ "Man U sold in record deal," *BBC*, August 18, 1989.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/18/newsid_2499000/2499267.stm

Despite the headline of this news article from 1989, the purchase of club shares by business tycoon Michael Knighton did not result in his complete takeover of the club. It did however strengthen the club's finances at a time when things were still shaky under Ferguson. An FA Cup win in 1990 convinced Martin Edwards and the board to keep the manager on despite poor league form, and it would be another five years before Ferguson failed to deliver a trophy.

¹⁸⁴ "British Football Record Transfer Fees from 1893 to 2021," *My Football Facts*, Updated May, 2021. https://www.myfootballfacts.com/england_footy/english-domestic/british-football-player-transfer-records/

ownership from Edwards was not total, and he still answered to other shareholders and a supporters' trust of minority fan owners. The club was still considerably richer than its peers in the Premier League, but maintained a very real economic connection to its football community.

Lastly, Manchester United's emergence in the 1990s can be largely attributed to its ambition as a company to promote and expand its brand across the globe. As the club achieved greater heights in the 1990s than ever before, their reach and influence was once again reinforced by a reputation of success and entertaining football. The club were conscious of this, as well as the draw of their history as one of the greatest clubs in football, and set about capitalizing on their popularity commercially. Their brand drew in more and more club sponsorship deals, and they entertained bidding wars from manufacturers like Nike, Adidas, and Umbro for the right to produce their official kit and club apparel. In 2002 a deal signed with Nike was valued at £24 million annually.¹⁸⁵ Club revenue was reaching unprecedented heights, and projections for the increase of TV revenue indicated that their profitability would continue to grow.

At the turn of the twenty-first century Manchester United were more than just a successful football club, they were a successful business. This drew the attention of Rupert Murdoch and BSkyB, the same company that built much of its success off of the landmark Premier League broadcasting deal.¹⁸⁶ Murdoch was now interested in

¹⁸⁵ "Nike ends Manchester United kit deal after 13 years," *BBC*, July 8, 2014.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-28220281>

¹⁸⁶ "Business: United accepts £623m BSkyB bid," *BBC*, September 9, 1998.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/167834.stm>

Rupert Murdoch's failed bid was broken up by the UK Government's Monopolies commission, but woke up a number of fans to the prospect of a billionaire takeover. The matter took place during the historic Treble season, and most fans saw it as evidence that the club was fine as is, in the hands of

purchasing a majority ownership of the club. If not for government intervention over monopoly concerns a deal may have been reached with the club shareholders, but it was indicative of both external interest in acquiring the club and the possible interest of majority shareholder Martin Edwards in finding a buyer.¹⁸⁷ Edwards and his father had owned the club since the 1960s, but as he began to cut corners for his own personal gain he had soured his relationship with fans. He tried several times to flip the club for lump profit, and angered fans in general for his profit incentive, even being quoted as saying that smaller clubs were a drain on the sport and should be “put to sleep” for the sake of the game.¹⁸⁸ As Edwards began selling off his shares of the club, Ferguson became the most senior figure at Old Trafford. As the manager’s own legend grew, so did his influence and leadership over the future of the club.

The club eventually found a buyer in American billionaire Malcolm Glazer. Glazer and his family investment group first ventured into professional sports with the purchase of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers of the NFL, and decided to move into European football with Manchester United in 2003, fresh off of a Super Bowl win in American football.¹⁸⁹ Starting with just a 2% stake in 2003, Glazer slowly bought out more and

thousands of supporter shareholders. Eventually Martin Edwards found buyers for most of his shares, and would step down as club Chairman soon after.

¹⁸⁷ “Manchester United 1998/99 Season Review: The Treble,” Bombo Sports & Entertainment, DVD, 2000.

¹⁸⁸ Glenn Moore, “Football: A game in search of its soul,” *The Independent*, April 14, 1999. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football-a-game-in-search-of-its-soul-1087368.html>

¹⁸⁹ “Super Bowl hero takes a slice of Man Utd,” *BBC*, March 2, 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/2813439.stm>

When Malcolm Glazer first began buying up shares of Manchester United his NFL franchise, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, had just won its first ever Super Bowl title. Glazer was among many foreign investors turning their gaze towards the Premier League, and recent debates among the supporters' trust at United was indicative of the fragile state of ownership of the club. Edwards’ exit in the early 2000s and the failed bid by Rupert Murdoch and BSkyB had opened the club up to investors, and Glazer was putting himself in position to take advantage of the situation.

more small shareholders of the club until he owned 30% of the club in late 2004, just a year and a half after his first purchase.¹⁹⁰ Glazer's investment was not a secret, and each of his acquisitions was reported in the press, but there was not much fuss made by supporters until his big move to acquire a controlling ownership of the club.

In 2005 Glazer purchased a major chunk of Manchester United from Irish investment duo JP McManus and John Magnier, adding nearly 29% of the club's shares. This gave the Glazers the controlling stake they needed to complete a forceful buyout of remaining minority shareholders, take the club off the stock market, and secure a total controlling ownership of the club.¹⁹¹ By 2006 he was the undisputed owner of the club, placing his sons Joel and Avram in charge of operations. The move was even more stunning and nefarious for fans when they realized that despite the financial prowess of the Glazers the club was to be used to absorb the massive debt from the loans the Glazers took out to complete the takeover.¹⁹² The large share owned by McManus and Magnier was the last hope for many fans who wanted the club to stay out of Glazer's control, and the circumstances which led to the buyout made it all more frustrating. McManus and Magnier were brought in partially because of their relationship with Ferguson, indicating that he would keep influence over the board. This relationship extended into horse racing, but when an ownership dispute began between Ferguson and the investors over the racehorse "The Rock of Gibraltar" McManus and Magnier sought a way out of Manchester United. Glazer gave it to them, taking on a nearly 70% controlling stake in

¹⁹⁰ "Glazer stake in Man Utd nears 30%," *BBC*, October 19, 2004.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3754598.stm>

¹⁹¹ "Glazer wins control of Man Utd," *BBC*, May 12, 2005.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4540939.stm>

¹⁹² Goldblatt, *Game of our Lives*, 170-171.

the process. Protests erupted outside of Old Trafford as fans showed out against what they saw as a hostile takeover, and events spun so out of hand that riot police were used to break up the crowd violently.¹⁹³ This was the first of several protests between 2006 and 2010, but fortunately for public order it was the most disruptive of them. Glazer kept on club CEO David Gill as a show of good intent with other club officials, the board, and most importantly Sir Alex Ferguson, with whom David Gill had a very good working relationship. This infrastructure was important for the temporary future of the club, but was demonstrative of the minimal footballing knowledge the Glazers possessed, as well as their lack of connections within the game. When this infrastructure was removed, the Glazers would be left without reliable football minds to keep turning out results on the pitch.

Even with Ferguson and Gill left in charge to continue their team-building and management, Manchester United's fan base was intensely divided over the change in ownership. Protests against the Glazer takeover were immediate, and a section of Manchester United fans even broke away and formed a new, community owned and operated football club. FC United of Manchester was founded in 2005 by breakaway fans, with the club itself stating that the Glazer takeover of Manchester United was "a catalyst and final straw by some, but it was not the sole reason for the formation of FC United."¹⁹⁴ Supporters of the breakaway justified their decision by identifying the acceptance of the Glazers as a betrayal of the club's values. "The club I have loved all my

¹⁹³ Goldblatt, *Game of our Lives*, 168-169.

¹⁹⁴ "Who Are We?" *FC United of Manchester*, Accessed via Wayback Machine. (https://web.archive.org/web/20160216175346/http://www.fc-utd.co.uk/m_waw.php)

life is no more,” one supporter wrote on a United fan site. “All the things we love - the chanting, the banter, the humour, the passion -have disappeared from Old Trafford.”¹⁹⁵ There was interest in the national media in gathering opinions as well, with the BBC asking fans to write in their take on the Glazer takeover. Many shared the sentiment of the breakaway fans, calling it a low point of the club’s history. “This really is the biggest downer in our club’s history,” wrote one blogger.¹⁹⁶ The moment was a turning point for this section of supporters, signaling the end of their support of the club. The moment highlighted the intense connection fans felt with the club, and what they saw as a betrayal prompted these emotional responses.

Other supporters were much less concerned about the takeover, regardless of the circumstances, and initially many fans were willing to accept what had happened. “Let's face facts! The majority of REAL fans realistically know that Glazer has got our beloved club in the bag,” one supporter wrote. “There's no point fighting a losing battle. Unless someone can throw in a few hundred million? So let's just look into the future.”¹⁹⁷ The emphasis on “real” is in regard to the breakaway FC United fans, and represented a divide between those that took the situation as a serious and damaging turn for the club as opposed to the upset but loyal faction. This reflected an annoyed but accepting section of supporters that appeared to have been a majority given continued local support for the club. Most fans appeared to dislike the Glazers throughout their tenure, but there were still record setting attendance figures year in and year out, as well as profitable

¹⁹⁵ Salford Lass, “FC United,” *Red11 REDitorial*, October 5, 2005.

<http://www.red11.org/mufc/devilsadvocate/articles/FCUnited.htm>

¹⁹⁶ Red-is-the-Future, “Fans react to Glazer's takeover of Man Utd,” *BBC Sport*, May 12, 2005.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/4542681.stm>

¹⁹⁷ One_love_one_united, “Fans react to Glazer's takeover of Man Utd,” *BBC Sport*.

merchandise and media revenues. The support for the club largely continued, and certainly survived the breakaway of FC United of Manchester fans. The protests that continued indicate the unrest never fully ended, but the inability to oust the Glazers through any sort of boycott of club performances, goods, or services is demonstrative of the loyalty that still existed within the Manchester United fanbase.

Sociologist Adam Brown pointed out that the protests against the Glazers were not simply anti-American and anti-foreign investment, but rather a plea by the local community to not be cast aside in the operations of the football club that they and their ancestors had always supported. For the local fanbase they were not simply “customers,” and they detested the commercially focused, “globalizing policies” of the club.¹⁹⁸ The longest serving members of the Manchester United community were desperate to maintain what they loved and cherished for so long, and did not mind sharing it with the world so long as it meant they remained important in its existence. They were after all Mancunian, and the club achieved its greatest ever period of sustained success under the previous ownership setup. The Glazer takeover was not necessary for the survival of the club, but for fans the agency of supporter ownership was a vital connection between the club and its local community.

Fan ownership was not unusual in European football, but the operation of top clubs in the modern era indicated a necessity for wealthy bankrollers. As the revenue of top clubs increased so did operating costs, especially player expenses. Transfer fees paid for the buyout of players and wages increased dramatically from the 1990s to the 2010s,

¹⁹⁸ Brown, Adam, “Not for Sale,” *Soccer & Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4, October, 2007. 620.

and coincided with the increase in revenue. An article from Vox Media calculated Premier League transfer inflation between the 1997/98 and 2017/18 seasons, and found that even after just a few seasons many transfer fees would have quadrupled their worth because of how rapidly revenue and spending increased.¹⁹⁹ Because of this clubs became more reliant on wealthy individuals and investment groups to bankroll team expenses. FC Barcelona remained one of the few major clubs in football that is entirely owned by supporters. Over 143,855 club members own FC Barcelona, and vote on club board members and a club President. Football journalist and historian Jonathan Wilson observed that the history at Barcelona was similar to that at Manchester United, one of immense success on the pitch built through the club's youth academy in the 1990s and 2000s.²⁰⁰ Becoming a powerful team in this period allowed teams to expand their brand as new multimedia allowed global access to the sport. However, a decline in form on the pitch after decades of success made Barcelona's severe internal financial and political problems a more popular topic of discussion, and the club risked monumental breakdown if it could not properly manage a turnaround.²⁰¹ This was a situation where having owners like the Glazers was actually somewhat useful for United. As was mentioned earlier, their goal of making a profit meant that while the club had absorbed massive debt from the Glazer's use of loans in their takeover, the structure installed was designed for

¹⁹⁹ Scott Willis, "xGunners: Historical transfer inflation," The Short Fuse, May 10, 2019. <https://theshortfuse.sbnation.com/2019/5/10/18564736/xgunners-historical-transfer-inflation-transfer-records-top-transfers>

²⁰⁰ Wilson, Jonathan, *The Barcelona Inheritance: The Evolution of Winning Soccer Tactics from Cruyff to Guardiola*, (PublicAffairs: New York, 2018), 22.

²⁰¹ Barnaby Lane, "A Spanish newspaper claims FC Barcelona is on the 'verge of bankruptcy' after it reported a \$117 million loss and failed to pay players," *Insider*, January 27, 2021. <https://www.insider.com/fc-barcelona-financial-results-lionel-messi-loss-debt-2021-1#:~:text=FC%20Barcelona%20is%20on%20the%20%22verge%20of%20bankruptcy%2C%22%20according,players%20their%20wages%20in%20January>.

economic sustainability and commercial growth. Manchester United avoided problems that Barcelona accrued because the club was not set up to take massive financial risk or loans for the sake of club expenditure. The club never neared such dangers pre-Glazer takeover, but the club did well following financial regulations of FIFA and UEFA while still turning a profit under the Glazers.

The model of fan ownership continued to exist largely at smaller clubs in Britain, and did manage to do so with relative success. Szymanski, author of the highly praised *Soccernomics*, presented in his book *Money and Soccer* a model for successful supporter trust ownership via Welsh club Swansea City.²⁰² Though Northern Ireland and Scotland independently established their own football leagues, most Welsh clubs play within the English pyramid. Swansea City were the first Welsh club to gain promotion to the Premier League in 2011, and stayed afloat in the division until their relegation in 2018. Despite some serious issues with club management in the early 2000s, the club were able to turn things around, Szymanski argued, with the help of community input, recruitment of wealthy fans, intelligent footballing decisions by the board in selection of managers, and the completion of strong transfers within a limited budget.²⁰³ The problem that this presented of course was that staying in the Premier League only grew a club's economic power so much, and in doing so also raised the value of player and manager contracts. Szymanski's book was written before 2018, so it could not have accurately predicted Swansea City's relegation from the Premier League, but it was foreseeable that the club's

²⁰² Stefan Szymanski, *Money and Soccer: A Soccernomics Guide*, Bold Type Books: New York, 2015. 246.

²⁰³ Szymanski, *Money and Soccer*, 245-247.

excellent recruits would move on because of the lure of bigger and richer clubs.²⁰⁴

Manager Roberto Martinez left the club in 2008 because of the draw of managing Premier League club Wigan Athletic, and his replacement, Brendan Rodgers, left in 2012 because of the draw of Liverpool, a club with which he would challenge for the Premier League title in 2014. Swansea won a League Cup in 2013, but declined soon afterward, and lost several key players along the way to richer clubs before they finally suffered the fate of relegation in 2018.

Swansea established the means of achieving promotion within their own limits, led by a supporters ownership group, but the ceiling of their success was reached in doing so. This showed the limits of the modern game on smaller clubs, created by the wealth gap and expense of the Premier League. The new rules that money dictated in professional football held smaller clubs in economic limbo, and even though there were paths to the Premier League for clubs owned by a supporters' trust, the market was hardly stable. The risk was greater than the reward for many clubs, and the result competitively was stagnation with suppressed mobility between the highest tiers of English league football.

The control that larger clubs had over the market in English football was reflected to greater effect in other top European Leagues, with France and Germany each featuring a single, rarely challenged club as perennial champions of their respective domestic competitions. Spain and Italy typically featured a bit more competition, but were still largely controlled by Real Madrid and Barcelona, and Juventus and the two Milan clubs

²⁰⁴ Szymanski, *Money and Soccer*, 248.

respectively. Real Madrid and Barcelona were however owned by supporters' trust funds, members of which elected club officials to run the club. This did not mean the clubs lacked wealth or wealthy investors, and management in the modern era turned to more commercial, revenue-focused approaches that sustained the massive economies of each club. The connection to communities was tense in Europe, but in England there were several instances of direct conflict and disconnect between club management and club communities.

Stadium relocation in the Premier League era was a particular source of conflict between communities and clubs for a number of reasons. Though it was a status symbol to build a new stadium it also angered fanbases over the destruction of historic grounds that intensified the fan atmosphere. Moves also had the potential to uproot local businesses, homes, spaces, etc., and in some cases it symbolized wastefulness for teams that already had beloved and sustainable football grounds. This was the case with Arsenal's controversial move from Highbury to a new ground named "The Emirates," funded by the Middle Eastern airline Fly Emirates, which also became the club's shirt sponsor.²⁰⁵ The move was massively unpopular with fans, who bemoaned the lack of atmosphere with the introduction of more corporate seating.²⁰⁶ David Goldblatt wrote about such an issue within the context of the 2012 London Olympics, and highlighted the wastefulness that was often found in the structure of mega sporting events and calling for

²⁰⁵ "Arsenal restructure \$493m of debt," *CNN*, September 20, 2006. <http://www.cnn.com/2006/SPORT/football/09/20/arsenal.debt/>

²⁰⁶ James Westwood, "Arsenal left their soul at Highbury after moving to Emirates Stadium - Wenger," *Goal.com*, January 20, 2020. <https://www.goal.com/en-gb/news/arsenal-left-their-soul-at-highbury-after-moving-to-emirates/of4w8gz2gbkd14ule1qivrlxv>

meaningful effort by sporting bodies to allow repurposing of facilities.²⁰⁷ The London Stadium, built for the 2012 games was repurposed by West Ham United in London, giving the club nearly double the seating capacity that their historic ground at Upton Park gave them, and making them one of the biggest venues in the Premier League. This was the kind of work that Goldblatt was hoping to see beyond the 2012 games, and he expressed admiration for the social value in the local investment in clubs. He wrote:

“Our sporting life points to the immense potential waiting to be tapped once we recognise the power of play to mobilise support and the capacity of clubs to be more than clubs. We must be bold enough to support new forms of common ownership and a real transfer of assets from state to society.”²⁰⁸

He named the anti-Glazer protests as an example of inspiring activism in the wake of corporatization in the sport, and called for more involvement in society from these lightning rods of cultural and communal energy.²⁰⁹ Certainly in the Premier League era the relationship between clubs and social movements was tricky, despite the apparent desire of some clubs to tout their history as a working-man’s club.

Goldblatt’s writing sympathized with fans, and his emphasis on the wastefulness of mega-event venues raised an issue that was dear to many fans, but the modern

²⁰⁷ Goldblatt, David, “Going the extra mile,” *RSA Journal* Vol. 156, No. 5544, 2010, 40.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41380058>

²⁰⁸ Goldblatt, David, “Going the extra mile,” 41.

²⁰⁹ Goldblatt, David, “Going the extra mile,” 41.

In an interesting twist of fate, West Ham’s final match at Upton Park saw the Hammers host Manchester United. Then managed by Louis Van Gaal, Manchester United struggled to overcome an emotional West Ham side. The match was delayed due to raucous West Ham fans pelting the Manchester United team bus with bottles and rocks as it entered the stadium, and the atmosphere inside the ground was equally intimidating and electric. West Ham won the match 3-2, preventing Manchester United from qualifying for the UEFA Champions League the next season and effectively sealing Van Gaal’s sacking a few weeks later.

stadiums were a far cry from the sort of football grounds that supporters valued. In the specific case of West Ham United, the ground they left held historic value in the community and fanbase. It had been West Ham's home since 1904, and the ground enhanced the voices of some 35,000 fans each match, creating a raucous and hostile feeling for visiting sides. The Olympic Stadium on the other hand looked nice but was widely detested by the club's supporters. Stephen Cross, a longtime member of the Hammers United supporters' club wrote about grievances with the move for *The Guardian*. "We have no singing section and have lost our home advantage," Cross writes. "The stadium is soulless and while supporters have made an effort to get behind the team, the atmosphere seems to be all but gone. The connection is fading."²¹⁰ Cross' words are similar to the voices heard against stadium restructuring in the wake of the Hillsborough Disaster, arguing that clubs are missing the point when they attempt to address the fan experience.

A historic protest in 2010 by Liverpool supporters shared many of the concerns raised in the anti-Glazer protests by Manchester United fans, and demonstrated a level of power from supporters' groups that could still exist at a rich club without fans having direct influence over club management. American investors Tom Hicks and George Gillett had a short tenure as owners of Liverpool between 2007 and 2010, and were forced to sell their shares of the club to John W. Henry's Fenway Sports Group, then known as New England Sports Ventures. Hicks and Gillett were forced out after struggling to repay the loan used to buy the club in 2007, and the undervalued rate at

²¹⁰ Stephen Cross, "'Goodbye to our history for nothing': why West Ham fans are protesting," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/feb/28/why-west-ham-fans-are-protesting-against-board-saturday>

which their shares were sold was barely enough just to cover their losses from the project.²¹¹ The pair had been nearly instantaneously detested by Liverpool supporters for their empty promises of investment after a leveraged buyout of club shares (similar to Malcolm Glazer's takeover of Manchester United). They proposed an unpopular plan for a new stadium rather than renovating the club's historic ground at Anfield, and used the club to absorb debt from loans taken out to purchase it in the first place. Sociologist Peter Millward analyzed the forced sale of the Hicks and Gillett shares after just three years of ownership, arguing that this showed the power of fan protest against some owners. Fan organizing mobilized in new ways, starting social media campaigns that encouraged direct local action as well as contributions and involvement from Liverpool fans across the world.²¹² The study is significant for its use of digital age methods in protest organization, demonstrating the impact of social movements on the internet within football communities. While an issue for Manchester United supporters appeared to be the feeling of abandonment among local fans, Liverpool fans showed the value in connecting global fanbases to local groups. It is interesting too that the new ownership group offered about the same style of ownership that Hicks and Gillett did. Henry and his investment group made it clear they had no intention of selling any ownership stake to the Liverpool Supporters' Trust, but they did show an interest in listening to fans and setting up lines of official communication between supporters' groups and the club's

²¹¹ James Pearce, "Hicks and Gillett: The living nightmare for Liverpool FC," *Liverpool Echo*, October 15, 2015. <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/hicks-gillett-living-nightmare-liverpool-10269266>

²¹² Millward, Peter. "Reclaiming the Kop? Analysing Liverpool Supporters' 21st Century Mobilizations." *Sociology*, Vol. 46, no. 4, 2012, 641. (Accessed May 2, 2021) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43497297>

board of directors.²¹³ The difference highlighted by Millward is these meetings was the effort to establish trust between new ownership and supporters' trusts. Henry delivered on promises to renovate Anfield, and funded moves for star players that once again catapulted Liverpool to domestic and European success. However, the lack of supporter-based ownership, even at a minority level, was a frustrating reality for many football communities that desired agency in the management of their clubs. For Manchester United there was not a drop in performances early in the Glazer ownership, but the lack of reinvestment in the squad at the same rate as years period became a significant issue for the fans and the team. Serious doubts would emerge from fans and players when key stars left the team without being replaced.

Manchester United's Footballing Decline and Commercial Expansion

In the summer of 2006 manager Sir Alex Ferguson made the decision to move on from long serving captain Roy Keane and sell the club's top goalscorer, Ruud Van Nistelrooy, to Real Madrid. Midfielder Michael Carrick was bought from Tottenham Hotspur to take his place, but this was the only move of the transfer window. This was surprising given the loss of such important players, but the key changes came from within the squad. Ferguson refitted his attack around the young duo of Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo, players purchased before the arrival of the Glazers. The payoff was instant as the pair delivered on the manager's trust with a first Premier League title in four years.²¹⁴ Carrick came good as well, along with the relatively cheap defensive acquisitions of goalkeeper Edwin Van Der Sar, Nemanja Vidic, and Patrice Evra from the

²¹³ Millward. "Reclaiming the Kop?" 644.

²¹⁴ Jonathan Wilson, *The Anatomy of Manchester United*, Orion Publishing, 283.

season before. They turned out to be bargain deals in the newly inflated transfer market, in which the Glazers were reluctant to spend, and the team became one of the most formidable defenses in Premier League history. They secured three successive Premier League titles, which temporarily silenced doubts that the team would struggle without continuing to spend, but the mood started to shift significantly when the owners failed to replace the best outgoing talent.

Wayne Rooney was an undisputed star, but Cristiano Ronaldo transcended the game in an unprecedented way. He scored 42 goals in the 2007/08 season, leading United to a Premier League and UEFA Champions League double.²¹⁵ It was the club's third ever Champions League win, and Ronaldo became the first United player since George Best in 1968 to win the Ballon D'or, awarded to the best footballer in the world. Having won every possible trophy for the club, Ronaldo asked to leave for Spanish club Real Madrid in 2009. A transfer was agreed for £81 million, then a world record fee for a player, but putting a price tag on the best footballer in the world was always going to be a bitter task for fans of the selling club.²¹⁶ Prolific striker Carlos Tevez left the club as well, and joined – of all teams – hated in-city rival Manchester City. What made the situation worse for the fans and the team was the money accumulated from player exits was not reinvested in the squad by the Glazers. Forward Michael Owen was signed on a free transfer from Newcastle United, and was free for good reason.²¹⁷ The former England golden boy was once one of the best forwards in Europe, but joined United as an aging,

²¹⁵ *The Official Illustrated History of Manchester United*,

²¹⁶ Rob Hughes, "Ronaldo to Join Real Madrid for Record Price," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/sports/soccer/12iht-RONALDO.html>

²¹⁷ "Owen completes switch to Man Utd," *BBC Sport*.

injury-prone player who was fast approaching the end of his career in 2009. Young French winger Gabriel Obertan was hyped as a potential Ronaldo replacement, but he hardly saw the pitch in his short time at Old Trafford. Antonio Valencia became a reliable squad player for nearly a decade, but hardly provided the impact that Ronaldo did. What exacerbated the gap in quality was Owen's taking of the no. 7 shirt vacated by Ronaldo, an iconic number in the history of the club and typically worn by one of the best players in the squad. He never came close to replicating the production of Ronaldo or Tevez, and United lost the 2009/10 Premier League to rivals Chelsea.

The lack of marquee arrivals made the Glazer ownership much more unpopular amongst fans, and protests increased at Manchester United matches. Ugly chants about the owners could be heard fairly regularly at Old Trafford, and the press responded by acknowledging the conduct in a negative light. One Bleacher Report writer even wrote "Fans have to realize exactly who they are and must act that way. They are not the shareholders or owners, merely ticket holders."²¹⁸ The protests were far reaching with Green and Gold protests at matches and a supporters' group called the "Red Knights" organizing fan investors to try and match the Glazers.²¹⁹ The group ultimately failed to convince the Glazers to sell, but the number of fans that backed the plan was indicative of the sympathy that many had with anti-Glazer protests. Club legend David Beckham even sported a Green and Gold scarf thrown onto the pitch after playing for Milan against Manchester United at Old Trafford in a UEFA Champions League fixture in 2010, adding

²¹⁸ Ramkumar S, "Anti-Glazer Protests Show Manchester United Fans Ugly Side." *Bleacher Report*

²¹⁹ "Manchester United Red Knights 'will not overpay'," *BBC*, March 5, 2010.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/8552250.stm>

high profile solidarity with the movement.²²⁰ Even club star Wayne Rooney became unsettled over the poor investment in team building. His key strike partners Ronaldo and Carlos Tevez leaving unreplaced in the summer of 2009 put the burden of playmaking and goalscoring on his shoulders, and he overplayed himself to a career threatening injury because of it. As a result of poor reinvestment, Rooney submitted a transfer request in the summer of 2010.²²¹ Though he eventually signed a new contract after some convincing from Ferguson, Rooney's public unhappiness contributed to the public discourse of the club management under the Glazers. The transfers in 2009 and 2010 were limited in terms of spending, as it became clearer that the Glazers were interested in turning Manchester United into a more profitable personal investment than maintaining the same level of competitiveness on the pitch with multiple expensive transfers.

Despite the lack of investment in transfers by the Glazers the discourse in the press at the time indicated little worry of what was to come in terms of drop off. Sports writers significantly weighed the footballing success against concern for the future. One sports writer even framed the new, cost-effective approach as "financial stability," citing the recent bankruptcies of the clubs Portsmouth and Plymouth Argyle respectively as means for concern in football economics.²²² This comparison highlighted how historic

²²⁰ Phil McNulty, "Beckham shows true colours," *BBC*, March 11, 2010.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/philmcnulty/2010/03/beckham_shows_true_colours.html

David Beckham would not openly support the movement after the match, and avoided choosing a side against the Glazer ownership. However the high profile reputation of the movement at the time would indicate that he was most likely aware of the significance of his actions, even if his goal was simply to show support to the Old Trafford faithful that felt let down by the club he once represented. .

²²¹ "Wayne Rooney confirms he wants to leave Manchester United," *The Guardian*, October 20, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2010/oct/20/wayne-rooney-manchester-united>

²²² Simon Edmonds, "Manchester United: Arguments for and Against the Glazers at Man Utd," *Bleacher Report*, September 6, 2012, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1324651-manchester-united-arguments-for-and-against-the-glazers-at-man-utd>

teams could buckle under the weight of expensive transfers and wages, but it is quite a stretch to argue that Manchester United would struggle in a way that was similar to minnow clubs such as Portsmouth and Plymouth Argyle. Despite the leeching tendencies of the Glazers, Manchester United's infrastructure was designed to be profitable. Club Vice President Ed Woodward specialized in the marketability of the club before taking over as club executive, and in that time United's annual revenue doubled.²²³ The club was incredibly profitable, much more so than before, but this did not translate to reinvestment on part of the Glazers. Edwards's tenure was unpopular among fans, but throughout his lengthy sellout the club continued to reinvest.

The stable approach also meant a rapid increase in ticket prices and an expansion of club sponsorships deals and corporate partnerships, both of which angered fans despite the increase of revenue. For one, the profitability directly affected the Glazers without adding talent to the team, and two, higher ticket prices and corporate sponsorships increased the paywall between supporters and the Old Trafford experience. Portions of the stadium were sold off as corporate seating for partner companies to award to employees and board members, which further drove up the price for supporters' sections as there was a high demand for fewer tickets. The club had spent a lot of money expanding Old Trafford, and by the mid-2000s it was the biggest club venue in the country, holding a capacity of around 76,000.²²⁴

Much of the concern at the time was coming from fans and supporters groups, and this is one of a few examples of writers seemingly showing support for Glazer Ownership

²²³ Graph, "Total revenue of Manchester United from 2005/06 to 2019/20" *Statista*, Updated March 10, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271665/revenue-of-manchester-united/>

²²⁴ Nick Coppack, "United 4 Blackburn 1," *ManUtd.com*, March 31, 2007. <https://web.archive.org/web/20111216043425/http://www.manutd.com/en/Fixtures-And-Results/Match-Reports/2007/Mar/Report-United-4-Blackburn-1.aspx>

This was likely due to the frustration that came with the end of the Red Knights' bid for a majority purchase of club shares. When the Glazers didn't budge, even after intense protest, protests became fewer and far between. It helped matters too that the expertise of Ferguson and a team built around Wayne Rooney kept United competitive domestically and in Europe. They won Premier League titles in 2010/11 and 2012/13, only losing the 2009/10 and 2011/12 titles on the final day of the season, won the League Cup in 2010, and reached the UEFA Champions League final in 2011. A few high profile arrivals helped appease fans outraged by limited spending, as did the appearance of sustained progress that came with winning trophies, and the 2010 protests would be the last major protest for over a decade.²²⁵ Then Sir Alex Ferguson announced his retirement after securing the 2012/13 Premier League title, a decision that came with some surprise before the season had even ended.²²⁶ The mood around the club at the time was celebratory, with both championship ceremonies in full swing with a parade through the city of Manchester and the footballing world reminiscing about Ferguson's unprecedented career.²²⁷ What perhaps went under the radar because of this was Ferguson's successor, David Moyes. Moyes had been managing mid-tier side Everton since the early 2000s, but had never won a trophy. His friendship with Ferguson was key in his appointment, but there was a plethora of much more decorated managers that were not considered, and no hiring process was conducted. The result was sobering for a club that had not struggled for trophies since the 1980s. Manchester United finished in seventh place under Moyes as

²²⁵ Goldblatt, *Game of our Lives*, 169-170..

²²⁶ "Sir Alex Ferguson to retire as Manchester United," *BBC*, May 8, 2013. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/22447018>

²²⁷ "Manchester United parade trophy and mark Alex Ferguson's retirement," *BBC News*, May 13, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-22507545>

Manchester City clinched the Premier League title. It was their lowest league finish since before the foundation of the Premier League, and meant the club failed to qualify for European competition for the first time in over twenty years.²²⁸ So soon after Ferguson's retirement it became clear that a club revival would not be a quick fix.

The team lacked leadership at all levels of the club, and an identity crisis set in that to this day Manchester United have yet to solve. When Ferguson retired he took on a reduced role as a club ambassador and executive board member, though the board role was largely symbolic. Long-time Chief Executive David Gill also took a reduced role to serve as an executive for the English FA, meaning that the club's internal structure for scouting, team building, management, and transfers was suddenly removed and replaced with a new chief executive, one Ed Woodward. He was a veteran in the world of finance who helped the Glazers take over the club in 2005 and served as Director of Commercial and Media operations until his promotion in 2013.²²⁹ This news went under the radar because of the club's ongoing Premier League title race, but was equally significant to Ferguson's retirement in terms of Manchester United's downfall on the pitch.

Though the club remained profitable for the Glazers, Woodward's poor business in the transfer market saw United miss out on signings as well as overpay for players that didn't quite pan out. In one of their worst deals they paid around £60 million for Angel Di Maria, only for him to leave after just one disappointing season for £40 million, a loss

²²⁸ 2013/14 Premier League table,

²²⁹ "Manchester United owner's move to promote Ed Woodward finalises the 'Glazerfication' of Old Trafford". *The Telegraph*, February 20, 2013.
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/manchester-united/9884218/Manchester-United-owners-move-to-promote-Ed-Woodward-finalises-the-Glazerfication-of-Old-Trafford.html>

of £20 million for United.²³⁰ They went through three managers in six seasons as well: the aforementioned Moyes, Louis Van Gaal, and Jose Mourinho. Both Van Gaal and Mourinho were highly regarded and accomplished managers in Europe's top leagues and the UEFA Champions League, but failed similarly to Moyes. Each manager attempted to install his own footballing philosophy at a club that hadn't undergone a culture change in nearly three decades, and the result was a hodgepodge team with no clear direction. It was at this time too that United's rivals each appeared to emerge more powerful than before. Manchester City reclaimed the title in 2014, Arsenal won the FA Cup for the first time in nearly a decade, Chelsea won the title in 2015 and 2017, and Liverpool began their journey back to prominence, culminating in a UEFA Champions League triumph and a first league title since 1990. The shared Premier League wealth was finally benefitting other clubs in Ferguson's absence, and Manchester United were left struggling with owners seeking a profit and a Chief Executive with no experience running a football team.

The Multimedia Football Club

Significantly, as the club declined as a football power it continued to grow commercially. Woodward continued his work as Director of Commercial and Media to greater effect as the club's Chief Executive, and continued to expand the brand with new sponsorship and partnership deals around the world. Manchester United was not only a club that was abundantly aware of its brand and worth in the modern sport, it was a club that consciously contributed to the construction of its legacy and image. Manchester

²³⁰ "Angel Di Maria Transfers," *Transfermarkt*. <https://www.transfermarkt.us/angel-di-maria/transfers/spieler/45320>

United capitalized on its mass appeal and marketability to great commercial success in the modern footballing market through numerous sponsorship and partnership deals, and streamlined its history and identity into multimedia content. They even had players featured in comically bad movie promotionals for films such as X-Men and Deadpool.²³¹ The club helped sell everything from luxury watches and scotch whiskey to sports drinks and petrol.²³² While it brought in a lot of cash it did not fund more successful teams.

The massive sell out did not impact the club much on the pitch as they struggled to find successors to Sir Alex Ferguson or his championship winning teams, but it was important nonetheless in the maintenance of the club as it continues to search for familiar heights. The numerous ventures into media kept United's name alive in culture, and in many respects nostalgia was marketed and sold as part of the club's modern ventures. The fears of fans that Adam Brown observed in 2007 had come to fruition: The club became more a megastore for Manchester United nostalgia and commodities than a functional football team.²³³

A primary area of the club's expansion was into multimedia production. The club created a strong presence on social media promoting both its men's and women's teams, celebrating major holidays of multiple cultures and religions, and sharing clips and highlights from matches in various formats. The club even made a TikTok social media account, formatting highlights to fit TikTok styles and trends and getting players to

²³¹ "X-Men Apocalypse | Manchester United | 2016," YouTube, May 20, 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn2D7-nezwY>

²³² "Manchester United's weird and wonderful sponsorship partners," *The Express*, July 24, 2016.
<https://www.express.co.uk/pictures/sport/7082/Manchester-United-sponsors-partners-weird-sportgalleries>

²³³ Brown, "Not for Sale," *Soccer & Society*, 621.

perform for the camera.²³⁴ The club's marketing team is acutely aware of modern trends and platforms globally, and has accounts based worldwide in multiple languages as part of its outreach to fans and younger audiences.

Among the club's productions also includes feature length documentaries and season reviews dating back to the early 1990s. The club even has its own TV broadcasting channel, MUTV, which was founded in 1998 and continues to provide exclusive content and coverage for subscribers. One Manchester United writer and podcaster described it as “a North Korean propaganda channel for Manchester United,” indicating a serious lack of objectivity when it came to coverage of the club.²³⁵ There was even a tape that was allegedly destroyed from a segment where then Manchester United captain Roy Keane was deemed to be too critical of his teammates on a post-match show.²³⁶ Pundits also neglected to aim criticism at the club's board, chairman, or owners when it came to extended periods of poor form whereas the consensus in other areas of media coverage focuses on Chief Executive Ed Woodward's poor judgement in football matters. This furthered claims by fans who saw much of the defense of the club to be ignorant of the Glazer ownership's role, and accused former players of avoiding the talking point. In some ways multimedia served as a form of distraction as well, and offered a medium to glorify the club and its past as it struggled in the present.

²³⁴ “Official #MUFC TikTok,” TikTok, <https://www.tiktok.com/@manutd?lang=en>

²³⁵ Paul Anson, “Roy Keane Versus Sir Alex Ferguson,” Roy Keane Versus Podcast.

²³⁶ James Dart, “Keane rant leaked,” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2005.
<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2005/nov/02/newsstory.sport2>

Roy Keane had an infamous falling out with Sir Alex Ferguson, exacerbated by this incident in which he called teammates' wages into question. His place in the team was in question, and soon after his rant he was told he could seek a move away from the club. The rest of his contract was paid out, and he moved to Celtic for the remainder of the season before retiring in the summer of 2006. He's remained critical of the club, especially the corporate sectioning of Old Trafford, managers and performances post-Ferguson, and the administrative management of the club.

The climate of the club had permanently changed, and nostalgia became a remedy in the form of media and film. The documentary *Class of 92* was released during the 2013/14 season, a low point for the club post-Ferguson. The film told the story of the famed academy graduates of 1992 and the 1999 Treble winning team. It featured interviews from the players, Sir Alex Ferguson, youth coach Eric Harrison, Eric Cantona, Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Stone Roses bassist Mani among others.²³⁷ It was a collection of personalities that fueled a 1990s nostalgic feature and placed Manchester United's values of youth and never say die attitude front and center. The film did not hesitate in emphasizing Manchester United's importance both in English football and the larger cultural context of Cool Britannia and Britpop. The players of the Class of 92 were iconic in their own right with all five of Nicky Butt, Ryan Giggs, Gary Neville, Phil Neville, and Paul Scholes becoming club legends. The sixth of them, David Beckham, was a transcendent star who achieved an unprecedented level of celebrity as a footballer. Quite simply, Beckham was an English pop star. His elite talent on the pitch paired with good looks, an eye for fashion and modeling, and a marriage to pop music icon Victoria Beckham, AKA Posh Spice of the Spice Girls, all made him more than just another great English player. *Class of 92* acknowledged this in its placement of the history within the Cool Britannia and Britpop movements.

In connecting the club narrative to Britain as a whole, *Class of 92* tied the club's values of bringing youth into the first team to the youthfulness of British culture and politics in the 1990s. Former Prime Minister and Labour Party Leader Tony Blair, an

²³⁷ Class of 92.

interviewee in the documentary, regards Manchester United's dominance in the 1990s and the Treble especially as a special moment in British culture, and in particular another signifier of the next generation coming of age.²³⁸ As leader of what was called New Labour, Blair wedded the party to significantly more capitalistic values than was previously the case. His landslide victory in the 1997 General election came with a strong embrace of the latest cultural phenomena and a rallying of notable celebrity support in football, music, and film. Blair even suggested the fact that he was young at the time to be significant in his becoming such a prominent political leader after seventeen years of Conservative rule.²³⁹

Another notable interviewee is Mancunian born film director Danny Boyle, who grew up a Manchester United fan. His perspective furthers the cultural connection the club is embracing, and he offers an almost literary take on the romanticism of the Busby Babes and Class of 92 comparison that is clearly pushed throughout the film.²⁴⁰ Boyle rose to prominence in the 1990s because of his hit film *Trainspotting* in 1996, and his vision clearly embraces the people and places of a downtrodden and decaying post-industrial British landscape. His presence is another link the club is making to the culture of both the city of Manchester and Britain as a whole. Manchester in the 1980s and 1990s was a cultural hub, particularly in music. Madchester and Britpop acts such as New Order, The Smiths, and Oasis became international successes by producing innovative alternative music that many believed captured an image of the city itself. The image of a

²³⁸ Class of 92.

²³⁹ Class of 92.

²⁴⁰ Class of 92.

working-class city was embraced by Ferguson as well, who in his interview emphasized his use of anecdotes from his time living and working in Glasgow, and reminded players constantly of the working men and women they played for every weekend.²⁴¹ The idea of representing something greater than themselves was wholeheartedly embraced in the film, and is a significant example of the importance of history and nostalgia to the Manchester United identity.

The films discussed in this chapter indicated a strong self-awareness by Manchester United and its key personalities of the role that its history and perceived value of promoting homegrown talent play in the growth and maintenance of its fanbase. Even the act of an investment in educating an audience on the club's own history through such platforms shows the value that the club has in its image as one of the biggest franchises in any sport on the planet. They also embrace the never say die image that was perpetuated by the many late comebacks that took place throughout Ferguson's tenure. Conscious of their history, the club embraced links from the present to the past, and no story was more important in club legend than the 1958 Munich Air Disaster and subsequent rebuilding under legendary manager Sir Matt Busby.

The legendary Manchester United team of the 1950s was the first English team to compete in the European Cup, winning multiple League titles with a young core of Academy products known as the "Busby Babes."²⁴² They competed in Europe against the wishes of the Football League, and thus saw little leeway in terms of scheduling accommodation. Short turnarounds after midweek games were more difficult to manage

²⁴¹ Class of 92.

²⁴² White, Jim, *Manchester United: The Biography*, (Sphere: London, 2008). 134-135.

at that time, and long flights across the continent were sometimes required. The team's plane stopped to refuel in Munich, Germany after a 3-3 European Cup quarter-final second leg draw in Yugoslavia against Red Star Belgrade in 1958. Harsh winter conditions made takeoff difficult, and the pilots had to abandon it twice. A third attempt took the aircraft past the point of no return, and the plane skidded off the runway across a road and crashed into a house. Twenty-three people were killed in the crash, including eight Manchester United players and three club staff members.²⁴³ Busby spent several weeks recovering in the hospital, and was in such poor condition that survivors delayed telling him the extent of casualties out of fear of worsening his condition. Busby carried survivors' guilt with him for the rest of his life, but decided to return to management the next season after his recovery. With much of his squad lost, he again turned to youth to rebuild. Five years after Munich he had built a team ready to compete again, winning the FA Cup in 1963 before winning the league once again in 1965 and 1967. In 1968 Manchester United finally won the European Cup, captained by Sir Bobby Charlton, one of the youngest members of the 1958 team and a survivor of Munich.

The club commemorated the victims with a memorial outside of Old Trafford, as well as statues of Sir Matt Busby and the "United Trinity" of Charlton, Denis Law, and George Best. The tragedy has shown up in popular culture as well. *Sing* magazine editor Eric Winter wrote a song titled "The Flowers of Manchester, and Morrissey, solo artist and former singer for Manchester band The Smiths, wrote a song titled "Munich Air

²⁴³ White, *Manchester United: The Biography*, 113.

Disaster” honoring the victims and survivors.²⁴⁴ ²⁴⁵ There was even a *BBC* feature film made about the Munich Air Disaster in 2011 starring David Tennant as Assistant Manager Jimmy Murphy.²⁴⁶ The cultural investment in maintaining the memory of Munich is unquestionable, and such an important moment in the club’s history immortalized time and again in popular culture signified the role the club possessed in England as a whole. Rising from the ashes of a crashed plane, Busby and surviving players built again and won the elusive European Cup. And for a club that has made a reputation for comeback wins, the 1968 European Cup is perhaps its most important fight back.

Manchester United also produced a number of season review films, which organized its accomplishments and uniquely documented them in film format rather than in annual book form starting in the 1990s. They released a season review DVD every year, charting the previous year’s campaign, highlights, and storylines. In the season reviews, the club constructs a season as a narrative, showing highlights of every game while adding brief interruptions to expand the context. While this adds to the production, it ultimately has also allowed the club to leave out or gloss over some damaging and/or controversial storylines that were affecting the season in real time. In the 2002/03 season review film a couple of controversies by club captain Roy Keane were glanced over quickly despite their causing a significant headache for the player and club during the season. In the summer of 2002 Keane abruptly abandoned the Ireland national team at the

²⁴⁴ "History," *Theflowersofmanchester.co.uk*

²⁴⁵ Morrissey, "Munich Air Disaster," *Attack/Sanctuary Records*, May, 2004.

²⁴⁶ James Strong, "United," *BBC*, DVD, 2011.

2002 FIFA World Cup in Japan over arguments with the team's manager about the quality of training and housing facilities for the Irish camp. This sort of behavior was unheard of at a World Cup from any player, let alone a national team captain like Roy Keane. The incident also came after the publication of Keane's autobiography, in which he admitted to intentionally fouling Manchester City player Alf-Inge Haaland as retribution for the latter ending Keane's season with a harsh tackle a couple years prior. The tackle was bad enough that the FA initially suspended Keane for three matches and fined £5,000, but upon his stating that the tackle was premeditated he was fined a further £150,000 and suspended for an additional five matches. The film however only addressed these incidents briefly, saying "Roy Keane was at the center of controversy over his decision to leave the World Cup, and the materialization of *that* book."²⁴⁷ The incident was obviously much larger than this narration let on, and going into the new season there was discourse in the press about whether Keane's behavior should continue to be accepted. *The Guardian* was keen to point out that Keane had quite the history of bad tackles and aggression, and the *BBC* argued that he was let off lightly in regards to his punishment.^{248 249}

This sort of focus on a singular incident could be seen as overinvolvement of the press but is one of many examples of football narrative being left behind in history and memory. Keane was at the center of attention for some time before undergoing a knee

²⁴⁷ "Manchester United 2002/03 Season Review: We've Got Our Trophy Back!" SLS Videos, DVD, 2003.

²⁴⁸ Denis Campbell, "Keane admits 'no remorse' for tackle," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2002/sep/01/newsstory.sport3>

²⁴⁹ "Keane let off lightly?" *BBC Sport*, October 15, 2002. http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/sports_talk/2329223.stm

operation that kept him sidelined until the spring of that season, and upon his return avoided the same sort of focus in the press that he was subject to as Manchester United once again won the Premier League. Keane was one of the inaugural inductees into the Premier League Hall of Fame in 2021, securing his legacy as one of the all time greats.²⁵⁰ But for all the grace and brilliance of his game, there was an ugly side that was a part of his legend that shouldn't be forgotten.

A notable exclusion from the 2018/19 season review is the story of mistreatment directed at Paul Pogba by the club's own manager.²⁵¹ Pogba, a World Cup winner with France and Manchester United's record transfer signing, was subject to intense and often unwarranted criticism in the media throughout his time at the club. This was exacerbated during runs of bad form because of his tumultuous relationship with manager, Jose Mourinho, who called him a "virus" in front of the rest of the squad ahead of a match against Southampton.²⁵² Many fans bought into the manager's side of things, blaming Paul Pogba for the team's poor form. In truth, Pogba had a career year that season, and was even named in the Premier League team of the season.²⁵³ The rough relationship between Mourinho and Pogba was a major part of that season for United, and emblematic of the disconnect between the manager and the squad in a way that eventually cost the former his job. What was given the spotlight and focus of the season review was the

²⁵⁰ "Keane voted into Premier League Hall of Fame," *Premier League*, May 18, 2021. <https://www.premierleague.com/news/2146423>

²⁵¹ "Manchester United 2018/19 Season Review," PDI Media, DVD.

²⁵² "Jose Mourinho brands Paul Pogba a 'virus' in Manchester United dressing room row," *The Telegraph*, December 2, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2018/12/02/jose-mourinho-brands-paul-pogba-virus-manchester-united-dressing/>

²⁵³ "PFA Team of the Year: Paul Pogba, Raheem Sterling and Sadio Mane included in side," *BBC Sport*. April 25, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/48028713>

appointment of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer as the club's interim, and eventually permanent manager.²⁵⁴ The man who scored one of the most significant goals in the club's long history took the big job, and notably was the first manager post-Sir Alex Ferguson to have any pre-existing relationship with the club. This status, and his honoring of the club's history and playing values under Ferguson made him stand out amongst the successors, and fit an identity that the club had peddled throughout their miserable efforts to be a winning club once again.

Manchester United's production on the pitch reached a new low under Jose Mourinho. At the time of his firing they sat nineteen points behind league leaders and were out of a qualification spot for European competition. The high profile clashes between the manager and squad plagued the team to that point, and the club's board responded to the toxicity by sacking him mid-season.²⁵⁵ When the hero of the 1999 Champions League final took the temporary job there was a feeling that it would only be temporary. Solskjaer arrived during the offseason of his job managing Norwegian club Molde. It was a job he had taken in 2012 after managing Manchester United's youth team, and had been there since with a brief spell in charge of Cardiff City in an ill-fated relegation battle during the 2013/14 season. With this as his resume it seemed unlikely that he would be given the job on a permanent basis, and then Tottenham manager was the press' favorite to take over at the end of the campaign.²⁵⁶ Solskjaer was an under the

²⁵⁴ "Manchester United 2018/19 Season Review," PDI Media, DVD.

²⁵⁵ Simon Stone, "Jose Mourinho: Manchester United sack manager," *BBC Sport*, December 18, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/46603018>

²⁵⁶ David Hynter, "Pochettino plays it cool but dance with United has already begun," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/dec/18/mauricio-pochettino-refuses-comment-manchester-united-manager-speculation>

radar choice for caretaker manager, but he was more than familiar with the club's rich culture and history, and brought infectious and immediate positivity to the team.²⁵⁷ The club went on an unbeaten run into February, racked up wins over Chelsea and Arsenal in the FA Cup, and staged a dramatic comeback win against Paris Saint-Germain in the UEFA Champions League.²⁵⁸ The momentum was unsustainable, as injuries and over the last month of the season ended hopes of a cup win and Champions League qualification, but the performances were enough for the board to give Solskjaer the job on a permanent basis.

The hire of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer as manager felt like a similar move to the club's nostalgia-fueled marketing. An iconic figure of their past returning to save them from austerity sounded too good to be true, and to a degree the club was embracing an image of itself that appealed to fans. And for an event that happened in the 2018/19 season there was already a book written by the end of 2020 documenting Solskjaer's tenure to that point. But the fact that the Solskjaer experiment had some success in just a short time in charge was an obvious boost to the project, but Solskjaer's tactics and investment in certain players reflect a consciousness of the club's history and values as well. Solskjaer gave great trust to players from the United academy, notably forwards Marcus Rashford and Mason Greenwood, and midfielder Scott McTominay. The fans, and even the players themselves, embraced comparisons to self-identified club heroes whom they watched growing up. The presence of nostalgia within the current team fit the bill for Manchester United's modern branding, but it worked better than what they tried before.

²⁵⁷ Jackson, Jamie, *The Red Apprentice: The Making of Manchester United's Great Hope*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019). 194.

²⁵⁸ Jackson, *The Red Apprentice*, 218.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined power dynamics in professional sport, and how they changed over time because of revenue focused management and the introduction of foreign investment in the English game. Manchester United's history as a successful power in England and Europe made them an attractive sporting commodity, and the club took every opportunity commercially to capitalize on their success. Through those efforts in the Premier League era they achieved their status as one of the most supported teams in any sport across the world. It did, however, anger its local supporter base, and in some cases caused irreparable damage to its relationship with fans. And yet, the connection other fans feel with the club continued to transcend their distaste for ownership, and they bought into the recent turn towards club management that reflected tradition and history. The climate of the modern club brought a new level of toxicity for fans to cope with, but the ones who endured did so because something remained that kept the club close to what they always loved. In this way Manchester United was a success as well, masterfully making itself accessible through multiple forms of media and placing commercial value in documenting its achievements.

David Goldblatt argued that football as a whole had already transformed into a nostalgia-machine, harkening images and atmosphere that glorify an industrial culture that Britain has long since abandoned. The appeal of football in the age of commercialism has been able to capture and market a connection to tradition and history, evolving into a "golden age of benign communality" so soon after being seen as a

pathogen in the body of society.²⁵⁹ The romance in Goldblatt's writing hides some of the ugliness that remained in English football, but taps in beautifully to the broad appeal that the game maintained. Manchester United and the Premier League were attractive to so many for a reason, they offered a connection deeper than just the surface level of elite sporting entertainment. Football maintained popularity because of the communal connection it offered, and elevating it to a global level meant that those communities expanded.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's appointment as Manchester United manager was justified given the change in mood and form at the club, but it also served to give life back to supporters who had become further frustrated with the club's modern disconnect from its past. After a significant loss to Spanish underdogs Sevilla in the Champions a league in 2018 Jose Mourinho claimed it was the result of "football heritage," meaning that the club's recent failure to consistently reach the Champions League had something to do with their inability to compete in Europe rather than Mourinho's own conservative tactics being to blame.²⁶⁰ It was a negative and soul sucking excuse from the manager, who just the previous season had just won a European competition with United. Solskjaer was the opposite. He radiated positivity as well as nostalgia, and notably quipped "that's Man United" after beating PSG in the Champions League a year on from the "football heritage" rant.²⁶¹ The quotes could not be more different and are fitting to signify the difference between what Manchester United fans did not and did want to hear. Though

²⁵⁹ Goldblatt, *Game of our Lives*, 95.

²⁶⁰ Musa Okwonga, "Mourinho, Man United and the meaning of 'football heritage'," *ESPN.com*, March 16, 2018. <https://global.espn.com/football/club/manchester-united/360/blog/post/3422359/jose-mourinho-manchester-united-and-the-meaning-of-football-heritage>

²⁶¹ Jackson, *The Red Apprentice*, 220.

the club tried often to find what fans wanted to hear, in Solskjaer perhaps they hit the nail on the head as they set out to repair a relationship with fans that needed mending for over a decade.

CHAPTER V – CONCLUSION

When the Premier League was formed in 1992 it was done at the behest of wealthy club owners who held a shared interest in maximizing revenue at their clubs. The product was successful without compromising the foundations of the English game based on merit and fairness. The promotion/relegation system remained, and any team can dream of one day making the steep climb to the top of the pyramid. However, the primary beneficiaries of the Premier League were indeed the clubs that have never had to imagine life in a relegation battle. Many of the original club owners who founded the Premier League have since sold their respective clubs for massive profits, and outside investment in the top teams has widened the wealth gap between the top clubs and the rest of the clubs in the country. The Premier League era saw an increase of dialogue and activism in regard to racism and hooliganism, both of which plagued the English game in years prior, but the primary motivation for doing so was to protect the footballing product. The culture of clubs changed as well, and as wealthy owners and investment groups became the norm, football communities lost meaningful stakes in their clubs. Only clubs with massive financial backing remained truly competitive, and it was a case of the rich getting richer.

Only twice had a club outside of the “Big Six” won the Premier League, but rare as it may be at least there is the chance that it could happen even in the age of big money. In 2015/16 Leicester City did just that, beating England’s best to the Premier League title against 5000/1 odds. The team’s best players N’golo Kante and Riyad Mahrez would go on to sign with Chelsea and Manchester City respectively, but the blueprint was there for smaller clubs to build smartly and apply analytics to their recruitment to find diamonds in

the rough and build a special squad to challenge the best. Still, it was highly unlikely that such an underdog victory would happen against the game's big spenders again.

On April 18, 2021, twelve of the biggest clubs in Europe announced their agreement to join a European Super League, an elite competition that features only the twelve best clubs each season, with potential to add other legacy clubs in the future. The Big Six English clubs made up half of this twelve, and the proposal immediately angered much of the footballing world. Fanbases for each of the clubs immediately condemned the move, labeling it as a greedy and morally bankrupt decision by billionaire owners to create an elitist tournament based on wealth and status instead of merit. The spirit of competition was considered by many to be totally compromised by this Super League, and fans, governing bodies in the sport, and even actual governments from around the world began searching for ways to prevent it from happening altogether. After just 48 hours the weight of protests and opposition convinced the six English clubs to quit the project, and three of the other European clubs soon followed. Opposition was interestingly more tempered in Spain and Italy, and for a common reason: jealousy of Premier League money. The English Premier League's ever-expanding economic power left other European leagues worse off and envious, and there has only been so much UEFA and FIFA could do to maintain financial fairness. The money that the Super League would bring in for the richest clubs would complete the wealth gap between them and the haves and the haves not in European football.

Much of this thesis was written before the European Super League's life and death, but its examination of the Premier League's foundation, the financial motivations for doing so, and the long-term effects since lead well into the inception and attempted

realization of an elite, private league for Europe's wealthiest clubs. The Super League proved that this topic is a fairly recent one which continues to unfold in new ways, but what remains true throughout modern developments is the expanding wealth gap between the top of the English football pyramid and the rest of the game. Inequality within the game expanded the ability of clubs like Manchester United to succeed while clubs like Leeds United and Swansea City struggled to stay alive. The Super League history cannot be written yet, but it is doubtless symptomatic of the same issues that surfaced in the sport after the Premier League was founded. Football became not only significantly more dependent on money, but it also became controlled by people who were completely driven by money. The founders of the Premier League were the same, and they all cashed out for massive profit. The Super League founders tried in their own way to do the same.

Supporters were successful in their stance against the Super League despite their clear loss of agency in the game, but it took the backing of everyone else in the sport who was missing out on a slice of the pie to create a level of pressure on the owners of the twelve rebel clubs to convince them to back out. FIFA and UEFA both threatened sanctions, and the Premier League, Spain's La Liga, and Italy's Serie A threatened points reductions. However, institutional backing of fans might not have been the same had FIFA and UEFA been a part of the Super League plans, and readers should look no further than recent allegations of corruption and bribery within both governing bodies to understand that their moral high ground was very weak in that situation.

Manchester United's involvement in the Super League was significant as well. They were a club whose former owner was instrumental in forming the Premier League, and the efforts of the Glazers in forming a Super League confirmed the fears of

Manchester United fans about their involvement. “Glazer Out” protests resumed en masse outside of Old Trafford, and a massive demonstration ahead of a Premier League match against Liverpool led to a match postponement. Thousands of fans gathered in protest of the Glazers, and a group of them even broke into Old Trafford and invaded the pitch. This took place even after the club’s withdrawal from the Super League, the resignation of club executive Ed Woodward, and a rare direct communication of apology from Joel Glazer to the fans. The protests did not force a sale of the club, but unprecedented dialogue took place between ownership and fans, with plans of an influential supporters’ ownership stake and significant investment by the Glazers into the team and its facilities discussed. United fans may not have gotten the Glazers out, but their continued protest prompted a significant response

Chapter two’s exploration of ways in which the Premier League addressed racism is similarly linked with ongoing issues. The diversification of the Premier League forced the hands of clubs and the FA to begin following the government’s lead in banning hate groups and abusive supporters from football grounds. Through activism and policy, racism was largely pushed out of football spaces and into more online settings, which seems to be the likely continued direction for combating racism in football. Though some academic discourse has taken place in this subject in race studies and sociology it is an arena that will likely need to develop more before more proper historical analysis can occur. The increase in online racism over the 2010s was well documented, but methods of reacting to and removing it are still not well established. The summer of 2020 was a particularly interesting period of online racism being discussed publicly by players and managers, as well as leagues and clubs lobbying social media companies to enact harsher

punishments for abusive accounts. Some even called for relaxed privacy protections so that accounts could be traced to the person operating them. This coincided with an international revival of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to police killing of black people and a cultural reevaluation of monuments to people and events of Europe and the United States' white supremacist past. It is also a period of the Premier League that will no doubt be remembered for the adaptation of play for the Covid-19 global pandemic, but the social isolation appeared to have enhanced player activism on social issues as well as virtual hostility from spectators.

This thesis took a broad approach to the history of the English Premier League and commercialization, and hopefully serves as a platform for future study on the topic. Difficulties presented by researching during the Covid-19 global pandemic brought unwelcome challenges to the project, and for future study on the subject I would like to conduct research on documents that would be accessible in person, as well as oral history interviews with fanzine editors, supporter activists, and even players if possible, to expand upon the cultural history sections. This is the part of the historiography this thesis strived to expand and is the area that most compels me in my efforts to explore the significance of sport in society.

APPENDIX A - Figure

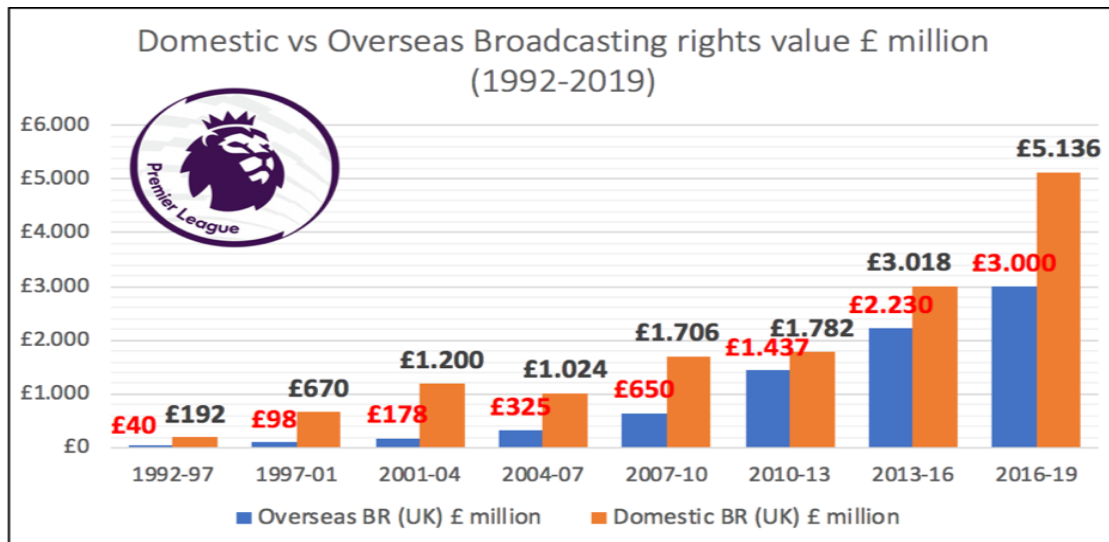


Figure A1. Increase in value of Premier League Broadcasting rights in millions of Pounds Sterling.

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