

The world's game, not England's

Premier League football clubs are destroying their roots as they grow

In the final moments before the teams run out, giant banners drift across the Kop stand, tugged over the heads of Liverpool Football Club's most besotted fans. It is intensely theatrical. [...] They are stage curtains, which roll back as the Liverpool team forms up against Chelsea, to reveal thousands of grim-faced Scousers who are suddenly, in an explosion of song, the main act.

"When you walk through a storm/Hold your head up high/And don't be afraid of the dark ..." Most English football clubs have anthems. But none is more powerful than the Rodgers and Hammerstein number "You'll never walk alone" belted out from the Kop before a big game; and that between Liverpool and Chelsea on April 27th was the biggest of the season. Holding up their red and white scarves, like stoles for a papal blessing, the Koppites tap the vast emotion invested in a club with almost as many glories and tragedies, over its 122-year history, as the city it claims to represent. No wonder so many foreigners want a piece of this.

Under its second consecutive American owners – Fenway Sports Group, which also owns the Boston Red Sox – Liverpool claims to have over half a billion supporters. Given a possible television audience for the English Premier League of 4.7 billion, that is just about credible. And the prospects for future growth, as millions more Asians go giddy for the league, are stupendous. Yet there is a hitch, to which "You'll never walk alone" also points. Because its promise of mutual support in adversity is as much about the fans who sing it as the team they revere. It is not just an expression of love, but also an assertion of ownership.

To whom do England's famous football clubs belong? To the foreign investors who own most of them? To the Mephistophelian television companies whose billions drew them and so many foreign players to the league that less than a third of its footballers are now British? Or to local fans, keepers of the institutional culture in which most of the clubs' brand value resides?

[...] Yet apart from occasional bursts of protest – for example, under Liverpool's previous American regime and Manchester United's current one, both of which loaded the clubs with huge debts – fans have put up with the gross commercialisation that has ensued. In compensation for soaring ticket prices and match times devised around Asian TV schedules,

they have had better facilities and wondrous football. Yet the disgruntlement is starting to coalesce.

In 2012 Cardiff City's Malaysian owner, Vincent Tan, changed the club shirt from blue to red, in a bid to attract more Asian fans. This sparked outrage and a campaign group, Stand Against Modern Football, which is said to have 150,000 followers. They demand, among other things, a bigger say for fans in the running of the clubs. Many look yearningly to Germany, whose clubs are rich, excellent and 51% owned by fans. A bad showing by England at this summer's World Cup, which is likely, will increase the disgruntlement, by highlighting the Premier League's failure to promote home-grown talent. So will the next wave of ticket-price inflation, which the debt-laden clubs feel is overdue. That is despite the fact that prices have already risen by 189% in real terms over the past three decades, pricing out younger fans.

It is possible to take a relaxed view of this. English football has thrived on globalisation more than most British industries. Even the most aggrieved Koppite must feel proud, on his holidays, to see so many Liverpool shirts being worn in Thailand or Vietnam (and he will worship Luis Suárez, a Uruguayan striker). The economic benefits are also vast: Premier League clubs are thought to contribute over a billion pounds a year in tax alone. Yet the erosion of Britain's dominant sporting culture, which it is contributing to, if not causing, should not be disregarded.

What remains of British civic pride is heavily centred on football teams – especially in struggling northern cities, such as Sunderland or Stoke-on-Trent, which have little else to shout about. The weekly footballing ritual also maintains in Britain an important sense of the shape and reach of the nation; perhaps Scotland would not be contemplating leaving the union if its best teams played in the Premier League. The risk is that, as English football becomes increasingly a confection of foreign players, playing for foreign television audiences, under English brand names, these benefits will be lost. Greying football crowds, a sign of weakening club loyalties, suggest it is happening already. [...]

(791 words)

Annotations

- line 4: **Kop** – colloquial name for a number of terraces and stands at sports stadiums attended by hardcore fans, particularly in the UK
- line 9: **Scousers** – colloquial term for the inhabitants of Liverpool

Tasks

1 Content/Comprehension

Outline how globalisation has affected football clubs in England.

2 Form/Analysis

Analyse the author's attitude towards the topic. Pay particular attention to the author's language and his line of argument.

3 Comment

Football has an all-pervading and global appeal. It is considered to be the people's game all over the world. Explain and comment on the fascination that football evokes in millions of people around the globe.

4 Creative writing/Text production

Choose one of the following tasks:

- Your British pen pal is interested in the role football plays in Germany. Write an email in which you explain the most important aspects.
- Besides football there are many other sports which are popular with fans and athletes in Germany. Choose one sport you personally enjoy and write a short article for a school magazine on it.

5 Cartoon



Analyse the cartoon and state whether you agree with its message.

Erwartungshorizont

Textinformation

Autor	NN
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1 Content/Comprehension

Outline how globalisation has affected football clubs in England.

Nowadays the majority of football clubs in England belong to foreign investors (ll. 22–23). Millions of people, especially in Asia, are interested in the English Premier League matches (ll. 15ff) and identify with the clubs and their players (ll. 45ff). This points to the huge economic relevance that the English football clubs have in the UK and around the world (ll. 46f). However, most clubs face huge debt, which has often led to rising ticket prices and gross commercialisation (ll. 29–30). This and the fact that more than 60 per cent of the players in English clubs are not British citizens has caused considerable annoyance among fans. Football has played a crucial role in the lives of many Britons and has contributed to the shaping of the country: “The weekly footballing ritual also maintains in Britain an important sense of the shape and reach of the nation” (ll. 52–53). However, if more and more foreign players compete against each other for foreign viewers, football will eventually lose its appeal (ll. 54ff). According to the text “greying football crowds, a sign of weakening club loyalties, suggest it is happening already” (ll. 56f).

2 Form/Analysis

Analyse the author's attitude towards the topic. Pay particular attention to the author's language and his line of argument.

The author is clearly concerned about how most English football clubs have developed. He starts the article by describing the impressive atmosphere in the stadium of the Liverpool Football Club and the enthusiasm of its most besotted fans. He then points to the popularity of the club in Asia, where people “go giddy for the league” (l. 17). The author believes this entails a problem, which he refers to as a “hitch” (l. 18). A succession of questions (ll. 22ff) raises doubts about who these football clubs belong to. Although the author concedes that globalisation has had many positive effects on football (ll. 43–47), he still believes that there are aspects which will eventually harm football as a sociologically important part of Britain. By evoking a very vivid picture of what football clubs in England have become nowadays, the author shows that he is worried about the future prospects of football: “The risk is that, as English football becomes increasingly a confection of foreign players, playing for foreign television audiences, under English brand names, these benefits will be lost” (ll. 54ff).

3 Comment

Football has an all-pervading and global appeal. It is considered to be the people's game all over the world. Explain and comment on the fascination that football evokes in millions of people around the globe.

Aspects students could mention:

- ♦ Football has artistic and aesthetic qualities that fascinate people – players as well as spectators.
- ♦ Football is easy to play: You only need some space and a ball as well as a (makeshift) goal.
- ♦ Viewers can identify with their national team or their club in their home town, so they can experience community when they join others fans in the stadium.
- ♦ Countries show national pride in their football achievements, particularly in international competitions like the World Cup, which enhances the idea of community and special bonds between people regardless of class, ethnicity, religion etc.
- ♦ Many famous football players are considered to be role models, especially for children and teenagers.

- ♦ Ideas such as fair play are attractive to people.

Students should conclude with an individual comment, e.g. on the value of this fascination. Opinions can range from positive (community spirit, fun, fair play, bonding diverse people etc.) to negative (money spent on international football events instead of improving the lives of the poor people in countries hosting the events, too much recent concentration on commercial aspects, football as a sport which has remained sexually discriminatory, the conflict between team supporters causing aggression, hooligans damaging people, property and the reputation of football etc.)

4 Creative writing/Text production

- a) Your British pen pal is interested in the role football plays in Germany. Write an email in which you explain the most important aspects.

Aspects students could mention:

- ♦ Germany can be considered as a footballing nation in which *König Fußball* ('king football') is deeply embedded in the hearts of German sports fans.
- ♦ Almost seven million Germans are members of the German Football Association (German: *Deutscher Fußball-Bund* or *DFB*), which is the sport's national governing body.
- ♦ During the week and at the weekends millions of amateur players and interested viewers partake in the training sessions and games of over 26,000 football clubs nationwide.
- ♦ Millions of Germans are ardent fans of one of the *Bundesliga* clubs (national league clubs) and/or watch the National Cup competitions.
- ♦ The German team is one of the most successful national soccer teams in world. It has won four FIFA World Cups (1954, 1974, 1990 and 2014) as well as three UEFA European Championships (1972, 1980 and 1996).
- ♦ The women's national team is also very successful: It has won two FIFA Women's World Cups (2003 and 2007) and eight UEFA European Women's Championships (1989, 1991, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009 and 2013).
- ♦ International tournaments draw millions of TV viewers in Germany, often in public viewing areas such as pubs or stadiums, which unites the nation as the people support their teams.

- b) Besides football there are many other sports which are popular with fans and athletes in Germany. Choose one sport you particularly enjoy and write a short article for a school magazine on it.

Examples students could mention:

- ♦ Alpine skiing (super G, downhill, freestyle, ski jumping etc.), snowboarding, triathlons, basketball, handball, hockey, mountain biking or cycle racing, swimming, track and field athletics, figure skating and equestrian sports (dressage, show jumping) etc.
- ♦ Reasons for personal fascination with the sports: individual answers expected.

5 Cartoon

Analyse the cartoon and state whether you agree with its message.

The cartoon refers to the fundamental changes that countries like China and India are currently undergoing. They have developed from being poor countries characterised by the mass deprivation to being considerable powers in the global economy and their citizens are competing for jobs in the Western workforce.

In the first panel you can see a father with his little son at the dinner table. In the background the boy's mother is wearing an apron and carrying a steaming bowl towards the table. His father raises his finger and says: "Be sure to finish your dinner. There are children starving in China and India!" and the tag in the first panel places the scene in "the 1950s". In contrast, the second panel depicts life "today", in which a similar scene is shown – a father is sitting at a table with his son; however, the son is wearing headphones and the mother is not a housewife but a modern woman with a briefcase and a shopping bag. The boy is doing his homework and looking at his father, who says: "Be sure to finish your homework. There are children studying in China and India!!"

The cartoon reflects the growing importance of India and China as global economic powers and the effects that has on the job market in other countries. Whereas both countries used to be so poor that children in the Western

world were reminded not to waste any food because of the starvation in India and China, today parents are worrying about their children's job prospects due to India and China competing for jobs on the global market. The cartoonist refers to how eager and driven people are in India and China. Thus he illustrates that India's and China's economic success will have considerable consequences on young people in Western countries. In my opinion the two panels effectively convey the cartoonist's intended message. It makes people aware of the fundamentally changing role of countries which were formerly considered to be developing countries in today's globalised world. However, I think the cartoonist also exaggerates the situation as employees in European countries will not always directly compete with diligent Asians on the global job market. In addition, there are still many children in China and India who are living below the poverty line, and parents are arguably still more likely to reprimand their children for wasting food than for not trying hard enough to beat global competition.