

SIR NORMAN CHESTER CENTRE FOR FOOTBALL RESEARCH

Fact sheet No. 7: Fan 'power' and democracy in football

1. Introduction

1.1 Recent years have seen remarkable changes in the way that football fans have organised and presented themselves, which has also helped to produce major changes in the way that football fans are perceived in the media and the public eye. Most people in football are now aware of the existence of supporter fanzines, the Football Supporters Association, and club-based pressure groups like Independent Supporters Associations. The local and national airwaves are also awash with supporter phone-ins and discussion programmes about the game. What many supporters have been striving for is for football to become more 'democratic', for fans' voices to be heard, and for fans' opinions to play a part in shaping the game's development. That there have been some successes in this direction, few would dispute. However, the extent to which supporters have fulfilled their aim of gaining a more meaningful say in the way the game is run is still open to debate. It is arguable, too, that new forms of ownership in football - especially the conversion of clubs to plcs with shareholders who expect profits - may make the prospects of a direct say for fans even more difficult to achieve.

2. Some History

2.1 *"The period 1885 - 1985 is... a period of football supporting without a history to its name"* (Taylor, 1992, p.191). Fortunately, the book from which this quote is taken begins to provide us with a move in that direction. Rogan Taylor's *Football and its Fans* (1992) traces the history of supporter involvement at football clubs throughout the game's development as Britain's national sport. It serves as an interesting account of the *relationship* between football and its supporters prior to the mid-1980s.

2.2 Using Leicester Fosse (later to become Leicester City) as a case study, Taylor examines the way in which football clubs and their supporters developed an interactive working relationship which, admittedly, was heavily weighted in the club's favour. In common with many clubs at the turn of the century, Leicester Fosse were keen to develop an 'expensive' and capable team which would be able to challenge for honours. Leicester's first such initiative failed and attendances dropped, to the financial cost of the club. Supporters, having been admonished for their lack of enthusiasm, were urged at public meetings in 1901 and 1902 to *"raise a 'working man's subscription', to form 'a financial committee outside the directorate'; to provide the Club with the wherewithal for securing the services of (capable) players"* (Taylor, 1992, p.17). This committee was duly formed, setting off a chain of events all too typical at football clubs during this period.

2.3 Over the next few years, the supporters' committee at Leicester raised considerable funds for their Club. All the while, however, protests were being made at the lack of consultation between the Board and the supporters - especially as the supporters were keeping the Club afloat. Attempts were made by aggrieved fans to form a Supporters Club, but these failed due to "*an almost cyclic ebb and flow of enthusiasm amongst fans*" (Taylor, 1992, p.19). Eventually, a Supporters Club came into existence in 1946, with the aim of "*arranging support for the Club*". The Club's directors refused to recognise this new group, no privileges were extended to its members, and their calls for improved facilities at the ground went unheeded. The situation was summed up in a local newspaper by the supporters' Secretary, a Mr Parfitt:

"We have, neither by word or deed, encroached on the business of the football club. Our business is to support them through thick and thin. We are not recognised by the club directorate but they know we are organised and prepared to help at a moment's notice."

(Leicester Mercury, 1 October 1948, quoted in Taylor, 1992, p.21)

2.4 The situation at this club (by now known as Leicester City) was mirrored at many clubs across the country during the first half of the century. The Supporters Club at Leicester was also a member of the National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs (NatFed). This was an organisation formed in 1927 under the motto "To help not hinder" - the main recipients of this 'help' being the football clubs and the nature of it being mainly financial. The NatFed encouraged harmonious relations between its members and their clubs. Perhaps the NatFed's most striking achievement was helping to persuade Parliament to introduce, in 1956, a Lotteries Bill, which relaxed gaming law and made it easier for supporters clubs to run fund-raising lotteries. In a sadly ironic turn of events, this Bill, in conjunction with FA legislation, later paved the way for *football clubs* to run their own lotteries. This meant that the help of the supporters in raising cash was less important, and this was another 'excuse' for their ill-treatment by clubs.

2.5 As an example of this, and of the sums of money involved in supporters' fund-raising efforts, this sorry tale was related to the NatFed's 1967 Annual General Meeting by the Ipswich Town representative:

"Two years ago we gave the football club £42,000 in twelve months... We have paid for everything on the football ground: the stands, the offices and the dressing rooms... We have never tried to dictate their policy... but... tried to look after our own business. That is perhaps where we have gone wrong... Without warning, a notice appeared in the press saying that they no longer recognised our Supporters' Club and a new one had been formed... We went to the Boardroom and were given our notice - the secretary and myself after 31 years and 35 years service. We were not thanked... we did not ask for thanks and we certainly did not get them."

(NatFed AGM Minutes, 1967, quoted in Taylor, 1992, p.123)

This kind of story was by no means an isolated case. All around the country, Supporters Clubs were busy raising money on behalf of their football clubs, and receiving little or nothing in exchange in the way of representation. Whilst the money that they provided was gratefully received, this did not entitle them to recognition, or to any sort of say in the running of their club.

2.6 The NatFed claimed in 1953 that the organisation had 500,000 members (NatFed AGM Minutes, 1953, quoted in Taylor, 1992, p.54), but its active campaigning role in the game was very low-key. By 1988 membership had reached an all-time low, with just 40 clubs represented at the Annual Conference. The bulk of these were League clubs (25), in contrast to the 1950s when the NatFed, at its most active, counted many supporters of amateur clubs amongst its ranks. In 1985 the NatFed held a debate entitled “Does the emergence of the Football Supporters Association present a threat?”. As we shall see below, the way in which the newly-formed FSA went about its business was in marked contrast to the NatFed’s largely non-combative history.

3. Children of the Revolution? The FSA, the ISAs, and the Fanzines

(i) The FSA

3.1 1985 was the year of the Heysel disaster. It was also the year in which a young fan died when a wall collapsed following clashes at a Birmingham City game and the year of the Bradford stadium fire. British football was arguably at its lowest ebb. In media and government circles, football supporters *en bloc* seemed to be regarded as hooligans, and there was little consultation with fans in the efforts to rebuild the game. A group of supporters in Liverpool, including Rogan Taylor and Peter Garrett, decided that the time had come for football fans to organise themselves in such a way that their voices would be heard and respected. Thus the FSA was born. In the words of Rogan Taylor:

“The organisation was sucked into a football vacuum where real supporter representation was virtually unknown. It was gratefully discovered by a media that had never had a fans’ outfit it could rely on to deliver something that sounded like an authentic voice of the supporters.”

(FSA 10th Anniversary Special magazine, May 1995)

The most obvious difference between the FSA and the NatFed is the fact that the FSA claims to represent the views of football supporters on a *national* level and is not an umbrella organisation for club-based supporter groups. However, perhaps a more crucial distinction is that the FSA seems a rather more ‘political’ and pro-active organisation which seeks to gain access for supporters to the policy-making bodies of the sport. As can be seen in the list of FSA officers (see p.5 here), the organisation aims to cover a very wide range of supporter issues.

3.2 The FSA has been important in re-defining public perceptions of football supporters as an articulate group with constructive ideas, genuine concerns, and a right to be consulted on major issues within the game. A summary of the FSA’s achievements can be found in section 4 of this factsheet. The major problem that the FSA faces concerns membership. At its height in 1988/89, it is estimated that membership reached 5,000 (Ruben, 1993, p.82) - it probably stands now at around 3,000. Lack of membership leads to lack of resources, and, perhaps more importantly, the accusation that it is not truly *representative* of the views of football supporters. However, it is undeniable that the formation of the FSA provided something of a model for football supporters to organise themselves in an effective manner. Many supporters have chosen not to join, the FSA preferring to do their campaigning at a local level without the aid of the organisation. This restricts the FSA in their efforts to mobilise supporters on national issues. A solution to this may be offered by

the formation of a network of local campaigning groups, to which the FSA may have to become affiliated (see para 3.4).

(ii) The ISAs

3.3 In addition to the FSA, a number of club-based *Independent Supporters Associations* (ISAs) have sprung up in recent years. These too are markedly different from the 'traditional' type of supporters club described earlier. ISAs are pro-active, campaigning organisations which seek to make football clubs more 'accountable' to their supporters. In many cases, ISAs have been formed to campaign on a specific issue. For example, one of the first such groups was the Queens Park Rangers *Loyal Supporters Association*, who, in 1986, were disturbed at the plans of Fulham's owner, David Bulstrode, to merge QPR with Fulham to form 'Fulham Park Rangers'. Fans' involvement in this campaign was crucial to its ultimate success in crushing the proposed deal. The consortium formed by former Fulham player Jimmy Hill to take the club out of Bulstrode's hands relied on the active participation (including share purchasing) of supporters.

3.4 The 1990s saw the formation of a number of high-profile ISAs. One of the best examples is the Tottenham Independent Supporters Association (TISA), formed in 1991 when Spurs were on the brink of bankruptcy. TISA ran a well-organised, and, crucially, well-publicised campaign which played its part in rejuvenating the club (although naturally Alan Sugar's cash injection was the major factor here). TISA now enjoys regular dialogue with Sugar (still the club chairman in October 1995). Of the groups set up to fight specific issues, perhaps the most notable has been the Hammers Independent Supporters Association's campaign against the West Ham Bond, which will be looked at in section 4. A national ISA network has now been established the aim of improving national campaigns and for the exchange of ideas.

(iii) Football Fanzines

3.5 The first publication recognisable as a *football fanzine* was Foul, which ran from 1972 - 1976. One of its writers, Chris Lightbown, defined the magazine's motivation as the fact that "*football had simply not assimilated any of the social or cultural changes of the sixties. It was in a complete time warp*" (quoted in *The Face*, 1987). This and other of Foul's gripes, such as poor media coverage of football and the lack of creativity in British football, are frequently echoed in contemporary fanzines. The other discernible influences on the late 80s football fanzine boom are the punk fanzines which emerged later on in the 1970s. These were founded on the notion that to make one's voice heard, the only real solution was the 'do it yourself' ethic of punk. Jon Savage describes punk fanzines as "*the perfect expression... a democratisation too*" (Savage, 1991, p.401) and this thinking played a part in informing the attitude and the motivation behind the extraordinary explosion of football fanzines in Britain from the mid-1980s onwards.

3.6 It must, though, be noted, that the circumstances surrounding this explosion were qualitatively different from those which inspired Foul and punk fanzines such as Sniffin' Glue. As with the formation of the FSA, the primary motivating force behind contemporary British football fanzines was the state of football in the mid-1980s. In 1986, two national fanzines emerged - the Birmingham-based *Off The Ball* and the London-based *When Saturday Comes*. Around the country, football supporters at virtually every club decided that it was time that local supporters found their voice. New developments in technology also allowed fanzines to be produced cheaply and at home. *Sportspages* bookshop opened in London and became the first high street outlet to sell fanzines, swiftly followed by other

shops in other cities. Club fanzines emerged almost everywhere. It has been estimated that over 600 football fanzines have been, or are currently, in existence (Haynes, 1995, p.64). In the mid-1990s the *When Saturday Comes* listing of UK fanzines counted around 370 titles.

- 3.7** Fanzine sellers are now a commonplace sight at British football grounds. However, the fact that so many have emerged is not to say that the history of football fanzines has been a story of unqualified success. Fanzines, by their nature, are *unofficial* publications which are set up largely by supporters who have some form of grievance about the way their club is being run. Their *independence* is thus a crucial factor, as it allows comment to be made without regard to official club policy. Generally speaking, these grievances centre on the lack of supporter involvement in decision-making processes. These circumstances can, occasionally, leave fanzines somewhat caught between two stools. Whilst seeking recognition and representation at a higher level of the club, it is crucial for them to retain their independence so that they can continue to speak out freely. Striking a balance between these two basic principles can be a tricky conundrum.
- 3.8** It is probably fair to say that the majority of fanzines, regardless of their popularity amongst supporters, have had limited, if any, success, in making those in charge of their clubs more accountable. There have, of course, been some notable victories (most notably the success of the campaign promoted by the Charlton Athletic fanzine *Voice of the Valley* in returning Charlton AFC to their home ground), but, in the main, fanzines remain unrecognised. Ipswich Town, for example, will not even accept sponsorship when fanzines offer it to them! (see issue 5 of the Ipswich fanzine *blue*).

Independent Supporters Associations active in England and Wales in mid 1990s

Independent Arsenal Supporters Association
 Arsenal Supporters Club Norfolk,
 Brighton ISA
 Bristol City ISA,
 Chelsea ISA
 SACK (Keep Chesterfield at Saltergate),
 Palace ISA,
 Derby County ISA,
 Fulham Supporters Club,
 Ipswich ISA
 Leicester ISA,
 Leicester City Supporters Club Northampton Branch,
 Independent Manchester United Supporters Association,
 Millwall ISA,
 Independent Newcastle United Supporters Association,
 Norwich City ISA,
 Nottingham Forest ISA,
 Independent Oldham Athletic Supporters Club
 Oxford United Independent Supporters Group
 Plymouth Argyle Supporters Association
 Plymouth Argyle Supporters Trapped in Avon,
 Preston North End ISA,.
 Blades Independent Fans Association (Sheffield United),
 Southampton ISA,
 Sunderland Action for Change,
 Tottenham ISA

Watford ISA,
 Wigan Athletic Shareholders and Supporters Club
 Wimbledon ISA,
 Wrexham London Reds Supporters Club,
 Wycombe Wanderers Independent Supporters Club

A far cry from the days when the primary function of supporters organisations was fund-raising for their club. It is, however, important to note that, despite the lack of *tangible* achievements in relation to the number of fanzines that exist and the number of people who write and read them, the fanzine movement has played a large part in a more gradual, long-term process of the emergence of a voice for spectators.

- 3.9** Partly because of the work of the FSA, the ISAs and the fanzines, football supporters have promoted a different public image of themselves over the last ten years, and a ‘new fandom’ has been established. Football fans are more likely now to be regarded as intelligent and active, rather than simply being labelled “potential hooligans”. This new fandom is not, of course, without its critics - there are those who say that ‘the people’s game’ is being hijacked by middle-class intellectuals - but it is surely a sign of considerable change that such a debate can even take place. Football’s new image has not, of course, been shaped by the fans on their own. England’s success in the 1990 World Cup raised the profile of football as a *sport* once again, rather than as a social problem. It is, however, undeniable, that football supporters are now perceived in a qualitatively different fashion from how they were seen ten years ago - by football authorities, the media, government, and, perhaps most importantly of all, by themselves. Nick Hornby’s book *Fever Pitch* (1992) is seen by many as the best example of the sign of the new fandom. The fact that it not only found a publisher, but sold over 250,000 copies, is testament to the changes which have taken place on the terraces, in the stands, and in popular perceptions of the sport.

4. Campaigns and Changes

- 4.1** On a national - and indeed international - level, the FSA has been instrumental in ensuring that a number of steps have been taken to improve the lot of supporters. The first such instance was the compilation of a petition, comprising some 250,000 signatures, against the proposed “national membership card” (an I.D. card by any other name) which the British Government seemed intent on implementing in the late 1980s. The FSA’s campaigning and lobbying played a vital role in turning Lord Justice Taylor against a national membership scheme. Other successes claimed by the FSA include:

- Refunds to be made available following abandoned football matches
 - 70% of FA Cup Final tickets to be given to supporters of the two participating clubs.
 - 10% of available space at Premiership grounds to be allocated to away supporters.
 - Campaigning for safe standing areas to be retained at football grounds (implemented in bottom two divisions of the Football League)
 - The establishment and maintenance of Fan Embassies at major international tournaments (Italia '90 and Sweden '92).
- (source: FSA 10th anniversary special magazine, May 1995)

In addition, the FSA has conducted a high-profile anti-racist campaign, and has been important in helping to establish Supporters Panels at FA Premier League clubs.

- 4.2 Local campaigns have also been a feature of fandom in recent years. One of the most high-profile of these was the campaign by the Hammers Independent Supporters Association (HISA) against the West Ham Bond Scheme. This was a scheme whereby supporters were asked to pay £500 or more in order to gain the right to buy tickets for West Ham matches after the re-development of the club's ground. The scheme was abandoned after HISA's concerted campaign against it. An overview of HISA's efforts - and its effects - was given in *When Saturday Comes* issue 74, concluding that:

"The West Ham directors were not beaten by the recession (though that contributed), nor did events on the field conspire against them (while they were relegated last year, they again look poised for promotion). They were defeated because of a well-run, vigorous campaign by the people who care most about their club: the fans."
(*When Saturday Comes* Issue 74, April 1993, p.7)

- 4.3 A similar campaign was conducted at Arsenal. Protests by Southampton fans were said to be instrumental in the sacking of the club's Manager Ian Branfoot in 1994. At Manchester City, during the 1993-94 season, supporters protested vigorously against the club's Chairman, Peter Swales, a campaign which eventually contributed to former player Francis Lee taking over the club. Swales later admitted that the roots of the Maine Road 'fan power' movement ran deeper than this single initiative:

"I always think that when Howard Kendall left Manchester City the supporters appointed Peter Reid... the supporters had decided that he was the man and they weren't going to accept anybody else... From then on they were always going to have a say in any major decision, whether that was a player coming in or a player going out, a manager going out or a manager coming in, a chairman going out or a chairman coming in."
(Peter Swales, quoted in Taylor and Ward, 1995)

- 4.4 In addition to these types of campaigns, there have also been several notable and popular fan-led initiatives against **racism**, particularly at Leeds Utd and Newcastle Utd. Such 'grass roots' initiatives have contributed considerably to the growth of a national anti-racist campaign in football (Kick it Out!) and fans contributed much to the deliberations of the Labour Party's Football Task Force on racism. More recently, partnership organisations involving fans – such as *Foxes Against Racism* at Leicester City - have also involved inputs from supporter organisations
- 4.5 In a broader sense, supporters have also had some success in their aim of gaining representation within the sport. At club level, one early notable example of supporter representation was at Bristol City, where Gary Williams, chairman of City's Supporters Club, was also a member of the club's board of directors. At Manchester City, during the 1994-95 season, Dave Wallace, editor of the fanzine *King of the Kippax*, was allowed to attend board meetings. In that year's FA Premier League Fan Survey, Manchester City were given the highest rating by their supporters in response to the question "Has the responsiveness of your club to fans' views improved a lot?", (see Figure 1 and 2 below) so it would seem that the experiment was well-received. At Oxford United, an ex-fanzine editor, Ian Davies, was actually appointed Club Secretary/Manager in 1995

Figure 1: How have things changed at your club over the past few years? (%)

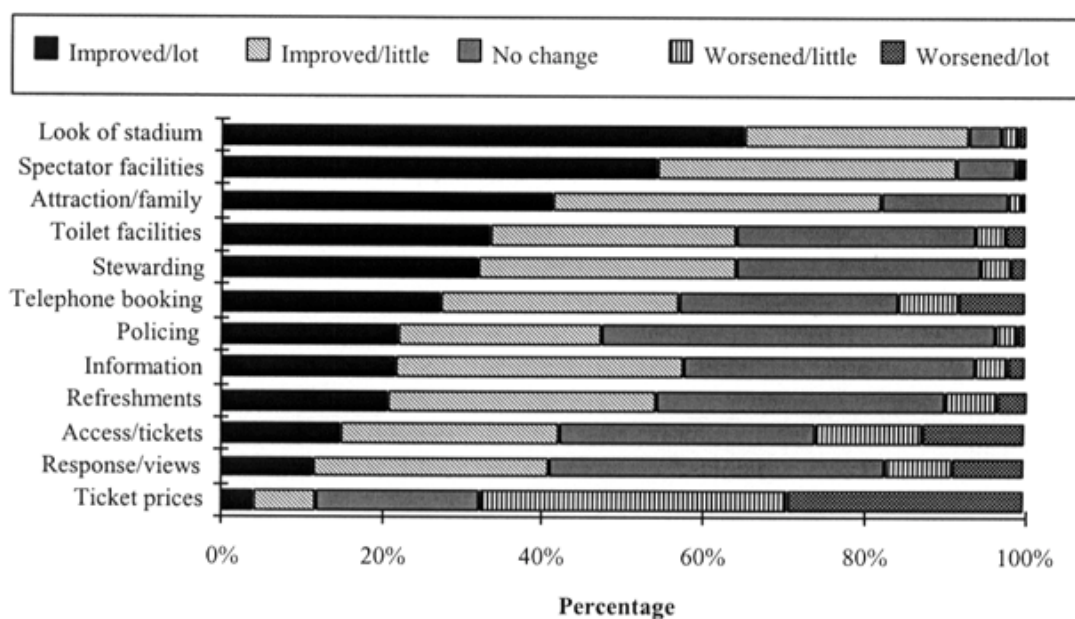
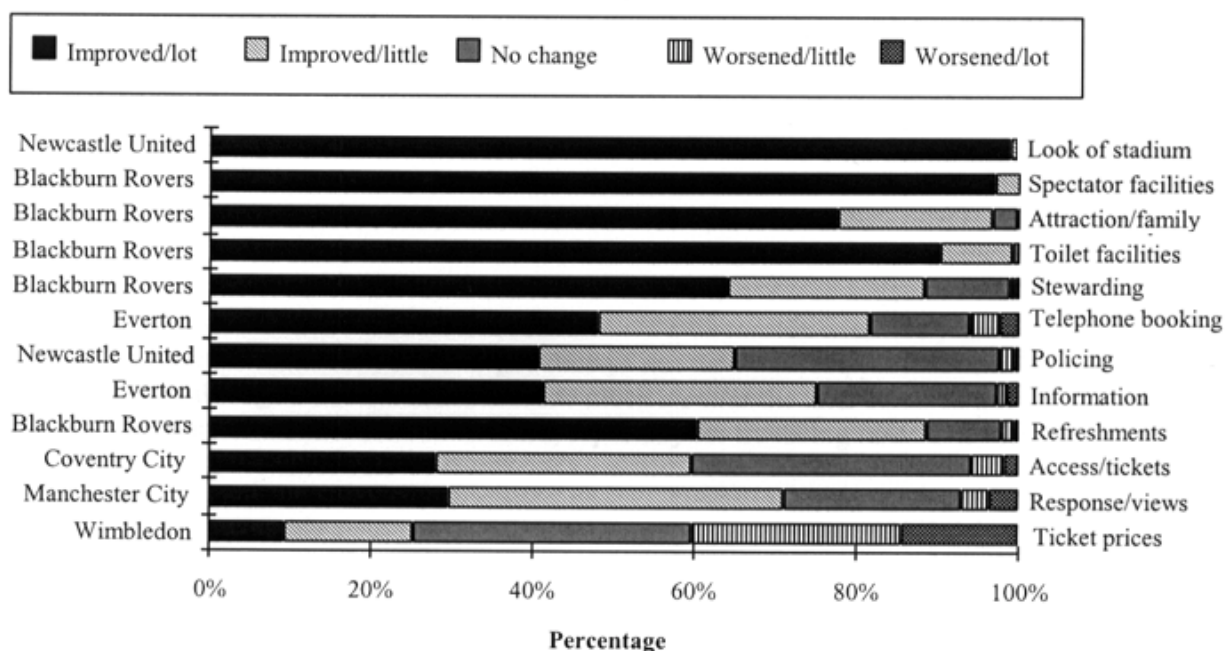


Figure 2: Clubs with the best performance in each category (corresponding to Figure 1)



4.6 On a national level, other gains have been made. Each FA Premier League club now consults regularly with *supporter panels* in order to discover fans’ concerns, and to explore their views on major developments. Also, the FA Premier League have commissioned large-scale *annual surveys* of supporters, which have been conducted by the Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research at the University of Leicester. These surveys have been conducted using fan samples from all top clubs, and have sought fans’ views on both club-based matters and issues in the game as a whole. This ‘establishment’ interest in the opinions of supporters might be taken to mark another milestone in the fans’ quest for representation and a more ‘democratic’ input. However, it is hard to know what notice the

sport takes of supporters' views. It may well be that the main use of the fan surveys for the game is as a piece of PR and useful market research. More recently, from 2001/2 all FA Premier League clubs are required to have '**Customer Charters**', which act as a benchmark for the work of clubs in delivering a reasonable quality of service to fans and in responding to supporter complaints. The FA Premier League itself co-ordinates club responses to the demands of the new charters which cover ticket prices, work on community issues and against racism and other issues. Clubs are now required to show a degree of consultation with fans, another aspect of the new Charters regime.

- 4.7** Another point worth mentioning here is the increased representation of supporters in the media's reporting of football issues. In addition to programmes devoted to fans' opinions (such as Radio 5 Live's 606), and programmes which are, in essence, about being a football supporter (such as BBC2's 'Fantasy Football League' - now moved to ITV), which have emerged in recent years, it has also been noticeable that journalists, in the reporting of football issues, are much more likely now to seek supporters' opinions. It is probably fair to assume that one reason for this is that fans have made concerted efforts to force their way into the media networks and now offer articulate 'alternative' perspectives on local and national issues.

5. Fan 'power' in the 1990s; New directions

- 5.1** Any assessment of the achievements of supporter groups must take into account the developments which have taken place alongside these changes in football fandom. Arguably the most pivotal of these was the report in 1990 of Lord Justice Taylor on the Hillsborough Stadium disaster. In addition to his recommendations concerning stadia, Taylor also brought into question the relationship between clubs and their supporters, and the implications that this may have for safety issues. He commented:

“As for the clubs, in some instances it is legitimate to wonder whether the directors are genuinely interested in the welfare of their grass-roots supporters... until recently, very few clubs consulted to any significant extent with the supporters or their organisations.”

(Hillsborough Stadium Disaster, April 15 1989, Final Report, para 53, 1990)

- 5.2** In order to improve this relationship, for the benefit of all parties, Taylor recommended that: *“By consulting with supporters, [management] could enlist the goodwill and the help of the decent majority”* (Hillsborough Stadium Disaster, April 15 1989, Final Report, p.23. para 133). It is also worth noting that the FSA and the NatFed were invited to submit evidence to the Hillsborough Inquiry and that fans were formally represented throughout its deliberations.
- 5.3** The formation, in 1992, of the FA Premier League was a development which had implications for everyone connected with professional football in Britain, not least the supporters. How has it affected fans? On the one hand, the FA Premier League has shown a greater willingness to listen to the views of supporters. As we have said, Supporter Panels have been set up at each FA Premier League club, and the League has commissioned an annual survey of FA Premier League fans, as described in para 4.4. On the other hand, however, the new economics of the League would seem to have rendered supporters ever more impotent in the making of the *really* important policy decisions. Monies for TV

coverage from Sky and the BBC are now worth more than £600million over five years (since 1996/97). Supporters had little say in the negotiation of this new contract, yet it affects them directly; some would argue that television now too much *dictates* the time at which games are played. This can lead to much inconvenience, especially for travelling fans. The money to be made from TV and merchandising at the national and international levels has tended to limit *local* fan campaigns to issues of *symbolic* relevance only. Local clubs are now in *international* markets and largely outside of local influence. More fans are now shareholders at large clubs but most lack voting rights.

5.4 More recently other dangers have faced - and been opposed by- organised fans. In 1997/8 fans of Brighton and Hove Albion have successfully organised in the face of what they claimed to be attempts of club owners to 'asset strip' the club and, at best, possibly re-locate it outside of the town. The campaign attracted national support and considerable exposure on Radio Five's 606 programme. In 1999 Brighton found a local venue under new ownership. Fans of Bournemouth rescued the club from Administration and financial ruin and a new Supporters Trust now successfully runs affairs on the south coast. Fans are also involved, with the Local Authority, in the running of Northampton Town at its impressive new Sixfields Stadium base.

5.5 In 1998, in perhaps the biggest test so far for fans trying to control some of the new corporate entrepreneurial interests in football, Manchester United fans organised against the attempt by Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV to buy a controlling share of the club. The fan group were successful in getting the bid referred by the Government to the Monopoly and Mergers Committee. In the new era of top clubs in *public ownership* the effects of supporter protest on the *share price* of clubs may be more effective in changing club policy than attempts at direct action to remove an unpopular manager or Board. It is clear, too, that some club administrators have rather poor regard for their supporters and customers. Directors on the Board of Newcastle United plc recently spoke contemptuously to an under cover journalist about the 'stupidity' of the club's fans in buying high priced merchandise. When the story emerged, to national condemnation, the two 'offenders' resigned from the Board apparently in disgrace. However, when the local response had sufficiently died down the two men quietly rejoined the Board and continue to lead the commercial 'reconstruction' of the club. So much, one might say, for 'fan power'!

6. Recent developments: gains or smokescreens?

6.1 Some of the recent 'gains' which have been made by football supporters have now been outlined. The relationship between football and its supporters is a complex one. Some accounts of the influence of fans have been described above; there are, of course, others. However, what is perhaps most important to note is that the success of football fans in shaping, in any way, the running of the game should not just be measured in terms of tangible campaigns and specific issues. It can be seen that the way in which football fans have begun to organise and express themselves may have had a more subtle, pervasive effect on the approach of those in power. The fact that genuine supporter *representation* is still lacking at almost all clubs does not necessarily mean that supporters' views are not considered at all at the highest levels. The fact that supporters are now making their voices heard, particularly through the media, means that those in power are likely to take note of what is being said, even if this is not always acknowledged.

6.2 We might, then, draw a distinction between ‘concrete achievements’ and more ‘symbolic achievements’. The ‘concrete achievements’ that have been made are those outlined above; campaigns on specific issues, and representation on policy-making bodies at local and national levels. ‘Symbolic achievements, on the other hand, are the gains that have been made in terms of fans making their voices heard in the media. Although a programme like ‘606’ may have little, if any, direct influence on football’s authorities, the fact that football supporters now have a platform for their views is an important development (It should be noted here, however, that “606”, now presented by Sun columnist Richard Littlejohn has also been criticised for avoiding issues of football policy, treating supporters’ grievances simply as “*the routine complaints of consumers*”, and being, in the final analysis, an “*inauthentic and closed form of communication*” (Williams, 1994). *Symbolic* achievements, indeed). Through their use of the media, football supporters have succeeded in helping to *re-define* public perceptions of themselves, and for this reason are now able to speak with authority and to command some respect. Needless to say that these factors are pre-requisites in any campaign for greater representation and for extending democratic involvement.

6.3 Having achieved a limited amount of power and influence, fans will be keen to try to capitalise on this and keep the momentum of recent seasons going. Major questions remain, however. The new patterns of ownership and control of top clubs make it more and more difficult to see exactly how supporters might be able to intervene effectively in club policy making. Clearly, the interests of shareholders do not, and will not, always coincide with the interests of supporters. Clubs which are now floated on the Stock exchange are ultimately accountable to shareholders and only indirectly so to football supporters. This is a major shift. The old patrician and *local* forms of ownership which have been central to the sport’s history and traditions have given way to corporate forms of ownership and multi-club ownership. These days it is quite possible that those parent companies owning clubs have a wide range of economic interests of which football is just one. Using the ownership of a football club in a *strategic* sense as one of a portfolio of interests would seem to place supporters a long way back in the pecking order of interest groups and opinion formers. Whilst it seems reasonably likely that supporters may gain influence on local issues and in the media, at larger clubs any such ‘victories’ seem more and more likely to be merely symbolic ones.

6.4 On a more optimistic note, having succeeded in getting a ‘foot in the door’, it may be the case that fans might have a better chance of obtaining at least a degree of representation in the sport which is in some way proportionate to their importance to the game. Certainly, the Labour Party has shown interest in the plight of fans, Their *Charter for Football*, published in December 1995, has much to say about fans’ relationship with the game. The key points are:

- Local ‘core’ support being “*priced out of the game*”; proposed investigation into more equitable pricing policies
- Fans’ views “*should be accorded greater weight within the running of the game*”
- Encouragement of the FSA and the NatFed to “*find a way of speaking with one voice*”
- Labour to undertake “*to ensure that the views of fans are listened to in all aspects of the game*”

- Labour to “*appoint a supporters’ representative to the Football Licensing Authority and other bodies in which they have an interest*”
 - Labour to “*ensure that elements of the Criminal Justice Act... do not impinge upon the genuine rights of football supporters to enjoy the game*”
- (source: **Charter for Football**, The Labour Party, 1995)

- 6.5** The last three points above are legislative measures; the first three are problems which the Labour Party formed its own **Football Task Force** to address. Although the Charter’s proposals were welcomed by supporters, there seemed to be a lack of firm ideas about the details of the changes which Labour were proposing; for example what are the ‘other bodies’ to which Labour planned to appoint a supporters’ representative? The **Football Task Force** took on the difficult job of trying to achieve more involvement for supporters in decision making and, perhaps, even an ‘ombudsfan’ or some kind of supporters’ regulator to monitor prices and policies at the highest levels of the sport and to try to deliver supporters’ a better deal. With football at the highest levels now strongly concerned with profits for shareholders, with ever increasing wage packets for players, and with the keen interests of international television it is hard to see exactly how the interests of the ‘ordinary’ fan are best protected. Many would say, today, that the quality of football on offer, the quality of TV coverage and the quality of stadium facilities in England is the best the game has ever known on these shores. All of this may be true, though it is also worth pointing out that those on the ‘outside’ of the football ‘revolution’ - those with no satellite TV link and with low wages - have certainly lost out on football’s new deal.
- 6.6** There are probably two other contemporary developments which are likely to be important with regard to fan power in the future. Firstly, there is the continued expansion of the **Internet**. This would seem to be an ideal forum to exploit in the search for a new supporter ‘democracy’. It has certainly been much used in recent campaigns, including those involving Manchester United and Brighton fans. It is accessible to large numbers of people, and, arguably, has a far less hierarchical power structure than other communications media (though many people still lack access to the Internet, of course). Anyone who has access to the relevant equipment can use the Internet to express themselves. Already it is serving as a means by which football fans can exchange ideas and information, and as more and more people become familiar with it, this facility is likely to expand
- 6.7** Secondly, as we have pointed out it became fashionable in the 1990s in Britain for football clubs to be floated on the stock market. This meant that any supporter - or group of supporters - could purchase shares in the club, thus ‘buying’ them a say in the way the club is run. The most decisive example of this came in December 1995 when the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association formed a ‘share club’ to fund the purchase of a number of shares in the club. This level of investment enabled a dozen of the group’s representatives to attend the club’s Annual General Meeting, a forum which they used to officially record their grievances with the club, most notably concerning ticket prices. It must be stated that the primary motivating force behind clubs floating themselves on the stock exchange was financial. Some clubs are wary of doing so, as there is the possibility that selling shares openly makes it easier for those currently in power to lose control of the club. On the other hand, a lucrative offer - like the recent Murdoch bid for MUFC - can also offer massive returns for shareholders. However, more optimistically, the possible benefits to fans - and the club - of a flotation were outlined neatly by the, then, Preston

North End chairman, Bryan Gray, whose club is one of the smallest yet added to the list of football clubs quoted on the FTSE index:

“[Selling shares] will put Preston in a very strong financial position. We always intended to widen share ownership. By turning supporters into shareholders, the club will become part of the community in a very real way.”

(Bryan Gray, quoted in the Guardian, 5 September 1995).

- 6.8** Most clubs which went down the stock market route are now trading at a share price much below the price on flotation. Leicester City shares, for example, fell from £1.10 on flotation to just 13p in 2002. The club fell in value from £24 million on flotation to just over £4 million in 2002. There are few signs yet in Britain of the sorts of club **membership** structures which operate at some top clubs abroad and which allow club members to vote, for example, for the President and other officials of the club. Such approaches would seem wildly out of place here, especially as top clubs seem to be seen, increasingly, by investors as potential cash cows aimed for a quick return on investment. In the meantime, supporters will continue to organise to try to oppose and to challenge the sorts of policies which they see as endangering the future of their clubs. Who is to say they will not continue to have at least some success?
- 6.9** Other recent developments in this area include supporters actively going out to raise money for the clubs they support. In June 1999 Everton fans launched an investment partnership, *Investors in Everton*, to try to raise money for the club among ‘blue-chip’ Evertonians in the City of London (*Morning Star*, 24 June 1999). Fans at more modest Bury, for example, organised public collections at the club’s matches in March 2002 when it was revealed that Bury had debts of £2.6 million and the club was placed in administration. Bury’s monthly wage bill at this time was £25,000 and its income was the same, a completely unsustainable situation. Because players’ contracts are protected by an agreement with the PFA Bury had to shed 18 admin staff, instead (*The Independent*, 8 March 2002). Leicester City in the same month lost 20 administrative when the club’s relegation from the FA Premier League was confirmed. In January 2002 two fans of Queens Park Rangers paid the £250,000 needed for the club to sign a player for the club. They also set up a company which asked fans to invest a minimum of £250 each towards transfer funds. If a player signed was sold on for a profit, fans then receive their initial investment back plus 25% of the profit.

7. Supporters Direct

- 7.1** Perhaps the single most important recent change in moving towards ‘democratising’ football clubs in England came with the establishment of *Supporters Direct*. This was set up with government funding in 2000 following the 1999 Football Task Force report on *Investing in the Community* drafted by a civil servant, Andy Burnham, who later went on to become a Labour MP and in 2002 became the Chair of Supporters Direct. Supporters Direct follows the setting up under Brian Lomax in 1992 of a Supporters Trust at Northampton Town where a partnership between the local authority and the football club had offered a new direction for smaller clubs. Lomax is now the managing director of Supporters Direct.

- 7.2** Supporters Direct offers funding support and guidance to fans who want to take a more direct involvement in the running of their clubs by setting up community focused mutual organisations. By March 2002 fans at 146 clubs had contacted Supporters Direct and trusts had been established at 46 clubs with a further 17 in the pipeline. According to Supporters Direct 24 trusts now 'own a stake' in their club and 18 have elected representatives on the Board of Directors. At other clubs trusts act, mainly, as a democratically elected and informed local 'regulators' and monitors of club activities. In a *State of the Game* survey conducted by Birkbeck College in 2001 83% of those supporter groups involved said 'having a greater say' in how their club is run is at least a 'very important' aim for fans. At some clubs the trust has a much more urgent duty. A trust was recently set up at York City, for example, when the club Chairman announced towards the end of 2001 that the Third Division club was deeply in debt and up for sale. The trust at York City aims to have members on the new board at York City if and when a buyer is found for the club and has also raised more than £50,000 towards club costs. In the long term the trust hopes to produce a football club with much stronger community relations and a very different sort of involvement with local fans.
- 7.3** At Wimbledon a trust was set up explicitly to oppose the plans of the club Board to relocate the Dons to Milton Keynes. It soon recruited 1000 members and is set to raise funds and support for the siting of a new Wimbledon stadium back in the London borough of Merton. At Lincoln City and Chesterfield supporters trusts have been set up, effectively to try to 'save' these respective clubs from financial ruin. The setting up of supporter trusts is a considerable challenge to the traditional 'commercial' model of football club ownership and control – especially at the lower level of the leagues. They offer opportunities for clubs to re-orient their activities towards new 'community' objectives. What is unclear so far, however, is how trusts might better control the escalating costs of smaller clubs and/or substantially increase club income. Indeed, many of the same sorts of financial questions seem to face trusts as faced the previous Boards of Directors at smaller club, competent or not, namely: how can clubs sustain a strong professional player base in the current Football League and survive in an era when wages at smaller clubs often make up in excess of 80% of turnover? It seems clear that without a wider re-distribution of income within the sport many smaller clubs will have to re-shape their activities and structure.
- 7.4** What supporters' trusts do offer, importantly, is a real stake for supporters in the running of their clubs and a longer term view of the importance of guaranteeing the future of smaller clubs as 'community' organisations, which are much more responsive to the views and aspirations of supporters – their core funders. Whether all smaller clubs can survive as fully professional clubs in the modern era is a moot point. Perhaps supporter trusts will also shape more input from players into local community networks, thus defraying some player costs? Perhaps trusts will successfully curb some of the costly short term ambitions of fans in favour of longer term stability and survival? There may be 'efficiency gains' in mutual forms of ownership which means that ownership can only come through active participation in the business or enterprise and that no financial ownership instrument can be traded with third parties (Michie et al 1999). At least the reliance on smaller clubs on the largesse – or otherwise – of individual benefactors or sponsors, or on major shareholders should be lessened in the future by the greater involvement of supporter trusts. Though many fans are still likely to look kindly on large, supportive investors who promise a brighter future. How this pans out in terms of the financial future of the sport at large is rather less clear cut.

8. The Independent Football Commission

8.1 The routine financial crises afflicting the English game in the 1990s and beyond produced no real agreement among members of the government's Football Task Force on the commercial way ahead for the sport. The government was urged by supporter representatives and others to go down the independent regulator route (see Hamil, 1999) in order to secure the pyramidal structure of the league and the economic survival of smaller clubs, though it remained difficult to see how independent regulation of this sort fits easily with the requirements of European football competition at the highest level (see, Williams, 1999). The government's own Task Force report on *Commercial Issues* could not agree on the status or the position of a regulator. Supporters' group and other Task Force members wanted an Audit Commission styled independent regulator. The football authorities wanted a body of self-regulation. Supporters surveys suggest fans favour self regulation. When the *FA Premier League National Fan Survey of 2000* asked: 'In terms of our commercial policies – on ticket pricing, merchandising etc – do you think clubs should make their own decisions on the basis of local demand or by more regulated by the FA Premier League or some outside body?' the results were as follows:

• <i>Regulation by some outside body</i>	19%
• <i>More regulation by the FA Premier League</i>	9%
• <i>Clubs should make their own decisions</i>	66%
• <i>Don't know</i>	6%

8.2 Predictably, the government opted for a form of self regulation in the establishment in 2002 of the **Independent Football Commission**. The two year delay in establishing the IFC was popularly supposed to be connected to the lack of agreement between the government and the FA Premier League regarding the Chairmanship of the IFC and the make-up of its members. Ex-Sports Minister Kate Hoey led a blistering attack on the new body (*The Guardian*, 11 March 2002) claiming that a preferred Chair (by supporters) for the new IFC – Sir John Smith – had been rejected by the footballing establishment and that football had been allowed to 'disctae terms' for the membership of the IFC. She went on:

'The body's remit and scope merely to receive reports from the FA and the FA Premier League is concerning. It has no power to tackle wrongdoings or make demands on clubs....The membership lacks anyone associated with fans or who has raised concerns about how football is run... football has shown it doesn't want rigorous scrutiny, especially from those who might have awkward questions.'

8.3 As it turned out, there are no supporters organisations or supporter groups directly represented on the IFC – though almost all of its highly distinctive membership describe themselves as 'football fans'. Chaired by Sir Derek Frasor, Vice-Chancellor of Teeside University, the Commission has the role of acting for the interests of fans but its membership has little to suggest a strongly 'grassroots' experience of the game's 'problem' areas.

Membership of the IFC (April 2002)

- *Ann Taylor MP*
- *Kate Barker, Member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Commission*
- *Lord Taylor of Warwick, Conservative life Peer*
- *Alan Watson, Deputy Parliamentary Ombudsman*
- *Julian Wild, Lawyer and company director*
- *John Willis, Ombudsman for The Guardian*
- *Chris Gamble, ex-British Council*

8.4 The IFC was taking on, as its first set of issues (2002):

- Ticketing at football clubs
- Customer charters
- The work of the FA Financial Advisory Unit
- Reviewing football's annual reports
- Looking at complaints procedures

8.5 Whether the new body is able to effect real changes in the arenas of transparency and accountability remains in question. Sceptics argue the Commission will be 'in the pockets' of the football authorities and that independent regulation is the only sensible way ahead for the sport. Sir Derek Frasier, Chairman of the IFC argues, instead: 'I firmly believe that independent self regulation can work' and he identified four pre-requisites for the IFC to be successful:

- That the regulators have personal credibility
- That the IFC is properly independent of the clubs, authorities and the fans, judging 'from above' all parties
- That there is real 'authority' and credibility in IFC reports
- Fourthly, that those who are regulated (the clubs and football bodies) take such matters seriously

On this last issue, there seems some initial scepticism. *The Guardian* (14 March 2002) described the IFC on its launch as a 'Soccer watchdog which has no bite.' The IFC has no statutory powers and can make recommendations only to clubs. We will have to await its effects.

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