

# English football - a benign global dictator?

By John Williams

## Enterprise and expansion.

In English football circles the mad scramble to be the international sporting brand is now taken as read. Annual figures are produced by the UK-based financial analysts Deloitte which show that top level English club football may sometimes struggle to attract the largest average crowds (Germany does better) or to recruit the very best of the world's elite players (Spain has an obvious claim), but when it comes to global reach, merchandise sales and international fan bases then it is difficult to argue the case with the giants of the English Premier League. Only Barcelona and Real Madrid can rival the international influence of English clubs, which means that the English game is an engine for global sports culture.

Or perhaps more accurately, Premier League football is now the world's most recognisable visual sporting muzak. Travel almost anywhere today around the world and it is almost impossible to escape its clammy yet seductive reach. Beyond the committed few enthusiasts who are huddled around their public flat-screens, English football is mainly comforting background noise in any crowded pub from the frozen north of Europe, to some of Africa's heartlands, and into Australasia's booming sports bars. Outside these venues, meanwhile, local kids typically play their pick-up soccer games wearing locally produced scalped versions of Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool or Arsenal shirts. Liverpool FC may be suffering a domestic slump in their form on the pitch, but global shirt sales of its recently departed Spanish striker Fernando Torres top all rivals.

So, more importantly in commercial terms at least, the internet and satellite technology which now carries images of the Premier League tens of thousands of miles can also harness these committed global followers or casual TV grazers alike for a crucial financial return. When Manchester United claims its own TV channel reaches 190 million "fans" worldwide today it is doing much more than mere breast-beating or proclaiming the club's global popularity. There is big money to be made in image rights and merchandising around global sport and it is the English who largely lead the way.

Much of this global interaction



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is very new of course and it defines a very different relationship to the one that existed historically between England and the rest of the football world. When FIFA was established in 1904, initially the home federations – England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales – refused to join the new international accord. As originators of the modern game, the British kept tight control over the laws of football and so saw no reason to share its expertise or good will with “foreigners”. Both the British Foreign Office and the Football Association were concerned that the amateur ethos underpinning the English game, of fair play and the values of (public school-educated) “gentleman” might be sullied by too much fraternisation abroad. They also worried that sport and politics would become intimate bedfellows – and their fears were partially realised, of course, in the events of the 1930s.

So before 1946 the British were intermittent members only of the official international football order and England had never played in the World Cup finals. Their relative isolation was to prove costly, as first Hungary (in 1953 and 1954) and then the emerging South American football powers showed the English just what they had been missing. And football humiliation occurred at a moment of a wider political and cultural crisis for Britain about their role and status in the world. Against this backdrop, an England World Cup win on home soil in 1966 brightened the domestic mood and in the 1970s and 1980s English clubs – crucially drawing on British playing resources – could still power their way to European success. But off the field the mood was darkening. As hooliganism tightened its grip in Britain, ironically it was continental Europe which now decided it had had just about enough of the ways of so-called English “gentleman”.

In this troubled era the main commercial advantage that a locally-owned club such as Manchester United had over its smaller English rivals was a home stadium that could accommodate 60,000 fans, compared to say 20,000 at Fulham or Wimbledon. Almost all the important income taken by English

clubs in the 1980s came directly through the turnstiles – and some of this had to be shared with visitors. This fraternal cross-subsidisation – a kind of “authoritarianism for the poor” – was a central feature of the history of the English professional game until the formation of the FA Premier League in 1992 blew it apart. Embracing neo-liberal, free market principles for the first time and extolling the virtues of globalisation over any sort of protectionism – football was essentially a business after all – the English club game was soon transformed.

Money from BSkyB ignited the English football revolution in the 1990s, but it is the increasing presence of international investors in England which has accelerated its global cultural creep. Around half of all Premier League clubs are now foreign-owned. Regulations which argue that sport is not just business, in Italy, Spain and Germany, effectively prevent the same thing happening in those countries. The Premier League today is also awash with international stars, meaning that every intrusion into foreign living rooms or bars is also a celebration of cross-national penetration. Accordingly, the presence of Michael Essien and Didier Drogba at Chelsea and Dimitar Berbatov and Park Ji-Sung at Manchester United, for example, is also an international cultural celebration of Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Bulgaria and South Korea respectively. In terms of promoting positive international relations, claims Arsenal's French coach Arsene Wenger, football is far ahead of politics.

So where is the down side? For one thing the looting by English clubs of smaller international leagues for star players means that clubs from France, Holland, Eastern Europe and even Germany have fewer chances of winning the top club prize, the Champions League. Teenage stars are now ripped out of their local contexts and routinely transported for a punt in England, where cries of “mercenary” greet every new record-breaking player salary deal. As a result, the hyper-ventilating elite English game is awash with debt: 56% of all the debt in European football in 2010. New UEFA rules are aimed at curbing this “financial doping”. The England national team has also suffered in the deep shade cast by the global roster of Premier League stars.

Finally, the global cultural and financial reach of the Premier League necessarily stifles local innovation and national difference. And for all the post-modern talk about prizing the sporting “glocal”, football surely should be as much a celebration of national *difference* as it is an emblem of the fact that such differences have been overcome in friendly sporting combat.



Theatre of dreams. Old Trafford, the home of Manchester United, England's most successful football club over the last two decades.