



TONY RICKSON

DEVOTION AND EMOTION.
CHEERS AND BEERS.

FOOTBALL IS BETTER WITH FANS

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Super shambles: No one likes us

IT'S GREAT fun being a football fan. The whole matchday experience starts with the anticipation on the morning of the game; the slightly tense and nervy feeling of butterflies in the stomach. Then there's the important choice of the right clothes to wear and planning the journey to the ground. It's about meeting up with friends for a pie and a pint, walking the last bit before going inside the stadium, and getting a first breathtaking glimpse of the magically green grass. Then there's work to be done. Clapping the players as they come out to warm up and cheering them all over again when they emerge for the match itself. And the following 90 minutes of breathless, heartwarming action. The singing, the chanting, the drama, the excitement, the celebrations, the passion. Being a part of it; the warm tingle of camaraderie. Win, lose or draw, enough memories to see you through the whole of the following week.

Of course, nothing's ever perfect and as we got stuck into the 21st century there was the odd niggles. The

game itself was different from how it used to be, many complained. Cleverer perhaps, and certainly more tactical, but perhaps lacking the bite and fury of days gone by. New stadiums were far safer, but that was another moan – they lack the atmosphere and familiarity of the old ones they replaced. The cost of watching a match had soared, as had the prices of merchandise in the club shop, as well as buying in the digital channels required to see all the top games on TV. Many clubs, particularly at the top of the English game, had foreign owners, giving the fans a sense of being distanced from the feeling of ‘we’re all in this together’. To the absentee owners it was a business; to the fans it was a passion. Diehard fans who’d supported the club man and boy, through thick and thin, felt resentful sitting next to a one-off glory-hunter fan who had no local roots and was there for a day out once a year.

And, in the Premier League at least, there was VAR, throwing up controversial, even shocking, decisions. Fans at the match were excluded from what was happening as vital decisions were taken from far away based on slow-motion replays which often distorted the action. Other sports had found ways around explaining what was going on to those who’d paid to be in the stadium, but football hadn’t. The whole system meant the huge joy of goal celebrations often went out of the window as an often endless amount of time was needed to check and recheck ludicrously marginal decisions.

All valid reasons for a supporter to complain that things weren’t how they used to be. Mind you, one fan remembered in a Facebook post how he was given a lecture

by a fellow supporter about how good it had been watching football 20 years earlier. And that conversation had taken place back in 1987!

Suddenly, and dramatically, it swiftly turned a whole lot worse. The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 and 2021 changed the way we all lived our lives, dwarfing all those other problems fans had been grumbling about. Matches at the top few levels of football's pyramid were played, but only behind closed doors. Beyond that, non-league and junior football juddered to a complete halt. Where leagues managed to carry on, the games were played in soulless empty grounds, devoid of all atmosphere – the whole point of our stadiums the way they are is that they were designed to be packed with people.

Mass vaccinations seemed to be allowing us to claw ourselves gradually out of the coronavirus crisis more than a year after it first struck. And then football – and its fans – suffered another hammer blow. This time it was the hugely controversial decision made by six of England's strongest clubs to join a brand new European Super League.

It was revealed in April 2021 that Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool, Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea and Arsenal were going to take part, along with Spanish clubs Real Madrid, Barcelona and Atlético Madrid and the Italian big three of AC Milan, Juventus and Inter. Real Madrid president Florentino Pérez had been elected as the first ESL chairman and he told Spanish TV that the league would be saving football at a critical moment. He explained that action was needed because 'young people are no longer interested in football'.

Condemnation of the plans was universal. And the fact that the proposed new league would be a closed shop with no promotion into it and no relegation from it was the worst blow of all. Football authorities, politicians, royalty, clubs, managers and players all added a unanimously strong voice to the protests. And so too did the fans, who played a huge part in getting the decision overturned within little more than 48 hours. Protecting the loyal supporters was focussed on and spoken about time and time again by everyone who played a part in forcing clubs into the speedy rethink.

Leading the way was former England and Manchester United player Gary Neville, now a top media pundit, who weighed in against the plans with all guns blazing on behalf of fans. ‘I’m absolutely disgusted, the plans are a disgrace,’ he said on Sky Sports immediately after the ESL was announced. ‘There are 100-and-odd years of history in this country from fans who have loved these clubs. Being a big club is not just about having a global fanbase – it’s acting properly at the right time. I’m not for everything standing still, but the fans need protecting.’

Neville himself is part-owner of a professional football club so was speaking with particular authority on the matter. So too, of course, is his old team-mate David Beckham. He commented on Instagram, ‘I loved football from when I was a young child, and I’m still a fan. As a player and now as an owner, I know that our sport is nothing without the fans. We need football to be for everyone.’

Those two were by no means the only former top players to condemn the plans. Ex-Arsenal striker Ian Wright was

furious with his beloved old club for getting involved. ‘Is this how far we have fallen?’ he asked in a video on Twitter. ‘That we are getting into competitions because we are not good enough to get into, so to the detriment of the English game we are getting a seat at the table we have no right to be at.’ *Match of the Day* presenter Gary Lineker said, ‘If fans stand as one against this anti-football pyramid scheme, it can be stopped in its tracks. We’ve seen clearly over the last 12 months that football is nothing without fans.’ Lineker’s colleague Alan Shearer added, ‘Where are these owners? Why don’t they come out and face the media? Tell us why they’ve done it, why they want a closed shop that no one else can get in to. These clubs can dress it up how they want, that it’s about protecting their interests to protect the wider game – but it’s simply about greed.’ Former England striker Peter Crouch said, ‘It’s a disgrace. It shows no regard for the history of our competitions and what those competitions have helped those clubs achieve. We don’t need a European Super League – the Premier League has more than enough money and exposure.’

Understandably, the 14 Premier League clubs who would have been left behind were also totally as one in their opposition. Everton led the way with a passionate and damning statement: ‘Everton is saddened and disappointed to see proposals of a breakaway league pushed forward by six clubs. Six clubs acting entirely in their own interests. Six clubs tarnishing the reputation of our league and the game. Six clubs choosing to disrespect every other club within the league as well as betraying the majority of football supporters across our country and beyond.’

At this time of national and international crisis – and a defining period for our game – clubs should be working together collaboratively with the ideals of our game and its supporters uppermost. This preposterous arrogance is not wanted anywhere in football outside of the clubs that have drafted this plan.’

Everton said it all, really, but other clubs were keen to voice their fierce disapproval. Brighton & Hove Albion said, ‘Plans for a European Super League totally disregard fans, the lifeblood of our sport at professional levels, and fly in the face of the views and wishes of the overwhelming majority of football supporters of all clubs.’ Leicester City spoke out: ‘Football clubs exist for their supporters, whose passion and devotion are not simply a response to the game, but a fundamental and indispensable part of it. Their contribution is fed by their right to dream – a right we share a collective responsibility to protect.’ Aston Villa echoed the thoughts of other clubs: ‘We are not standing idly by allowing the dreams of Aston Villa fans to be taken away by this sinister scheme.’ West Ham’s statement read, ‘These proposals are an attack on sporting integrity, undermine competition, and ignore those supporters, and those of the thousands of clubs and millions of players, from the Premier League to Sunday League, who can aspire to reach the top of the game. Our supporters have been there throughout our 125-year journey, for our FA Cup and European Cup Winners’ Cup wins, our promotions and many other memorable moments.’ Wolverhampton Wanderers accused the owners of the six clubs of having ‘plotted and schemed to find a way to exist in a small and

comfortable bubble’ and West Bromwich Albion said they wholly opposed the ‘selfish and divisive plans’ that no genuine football fan could support. A meeting of the 14 clubs ‘unanimously and vigorously rejected’ the plans for the Super League and it was announced that they would be considering all possible actions to prevent it from progressing.

Players also added their thoughts, and it was particularly relevant when those who spoke out were with clubs who were part of the proposed breakaway. Liverpool’s squad jointly put a message to their owners on social media: ‘We don’t like it and we don’t want it to happen. This is our collective position. Our commitment to this football club and its supporters is absolute and unconditional.’ Manchester United and England defender Luke Shaw commented, ‘I worry that these proposed changes could impact the sport that I and millions love. We have been without supporters in stadiums for over a year now and I know how much myself and the team have missed them in each and every game. Fans and players should always have a voice and their opinion should always be counted.’

Burnley captain Ben Mee added, ‘Footballers play for the fans, not people in boardrooms. No one scores a goal or makes a last-ditch tackle to earn the praise of the owners. They do it for the feeling they get when the crowd roars.’ And Leeds United striker Patrick Bamford told Sky Sports, ‘I haven’t seen one football fan who’s happy about it. Football’s for the fans – it’s important we stand our ground. It’s amazing the amount of uproar that comes into the game when someone’s pocket is being hurt. It’s a shame

it's not like this with everything that's going wrong in the game, like racism.'

Bamford was speaking after Leeds (outside the six) had drawn with Liverpool (inside the six) at Elland Road. Supporters were joined by fans from other clubs outside the ground to stage a protest – during which a Liverpool shirt was burned, and a plane flew over the stadium displaying an anti-ESL message. Leeds players warmed up in T-shirts saying 'Earn It' next to the Champions League logo and 'Football is for the fans', and left a spare set of shirts in Liverpool's dressing room in case they wanted to join the protest. That angered Liverpool manager Jürgen Klopp, who pointed out, 'We were not involved in the process. We are the team, we wear the club shirts with pride. Somebody has made a decision with the owners in world football that we don't know exactly why.'

Managers like Klopp were put in the invidious position of being asked about something they personally didn't agree with, but the people paying their wages had signed up to. Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola trod the same dividing line but spoke out about the closed shop issue: 'It is not sport when the relation between effort and success and reward doesn't exist. It is not sport if it doesn't matter if you lose.'

Even royalty got involved in what was a huge media story and the Duke of Cambridge offered, 'More than ever, we must protect the entire football community – from the top level to the grassroots – and the values of competition and fairness at its core. I share the concerns of fans about the proposed Super League and the damage it risks causing to the game we love.'

And, of course, fans are never far from a social media platform. One of the many thousands who tweeted, Manny commented, ‘Why don’t we fans just unite and say we will not watch the Super League. No eyeballs, no ads, no revenue. Hit them where it hurts – their bottom line. Too naive?’ Kevin tweeted that he hoped the six would actually leave the Premier League: ‘This would allow the rest of the league to have a more competitive setup. Every club believing they could win the Premier League. At the moment, it’s only the dreams of a handful, and they want out.’ And Andy warned, ‘Who in this day and age can afford to buy a football club? Anyone that does it doesn’t do it for the love of the game, they do it as an investment to make money from. Get the blinkers off, football fans, this is the reality.’

While the professionals who earn their living from the game were sticking up for the fans, the supporters themselves were taking direct action. About 1,000 Chelsea followers had gathered outside Stamford Bridge while the team were preparing to play a midweek Premier League game against Brighton. Top effort, that, as they’d far rather have been allowed inside to watch the match than stand outside parading their banners and voicing their angry thoughts. It was while the protest was going on that word filtered out about Chelsea and Manchester City having second thoughts over the whole plan. Within hours, it had collapsed like a house of cards as the other four English clubs followed suit. Max tweeted, ‘Say what you want about the ESL, the knock-out stages are exciting ...’ Mark added, ‘I’ll tell you one thing this European Super League bollocks

has done. Brought 99.9 per cent of football fans who are usually at each other's throats together in shared disgust.' England and Manchester City star Raheem Sterling also took to Twitter to succinctly sum it all up in two words: 'Ok, bye.'

UEFA president Aleksander Čeferin said the six English clubs were 'back in the fold', adding, 'The important thing now is that we move on, rebuild the unity that the game enjoyed before this and move forward together.'

Leeds had played a prominent part in fighting the ESL plans. Chief executive Angus Kinnear wrote in the matchday programme for a game with Manchester United days after the plans were ditched: 'They were a betrayal of every true football supporter. It was a disgrace that managers and players were left to defend the indefensible while owners cowered at home.'

ESL chairman Florentino Pérez reflected, 'Maybe we didn't explain it well, but they also didn't give us an opportunity to explain it. I've never seen threats like this. It was like we killed someone. It was like we killed football. But we were trying to work out how to save football.'

Owners of the six English clubs offered apologies for getting involved in the first place and Liverpool chief executive Billy Hogan promised to do all he could to win back the supporters' trust. Chelsea said the club had feared damage to its reputation and alienating fans, as well as undermining some of its campaigning and community work. They said that the original decision to sign up was because they didn't want to fall behind some of their closest rivals. The European Super League was no more, but bet

your life the idea will resurface another fine day when no one's looking.

Despite the U-turn, fans continued to take to the streets outside stadiums, now directing their anger elsewhere. Arsenal supporters staged a dramatic mass protest where club owner Stan Kroenke was the subject of a brilliant pun on one of the banners: 'Pin the fail on the Kroenke'. A lot of thought had gone into another banner: 'You stole our crest, we stayed/You took our home, we moved/Wherever you went, we followed/Whatever price you want, we paid/All for you to go and sell our soul!' At Manchester United, supporters revived a colourful protest of ten years previously which they staged against the club owners by focussing on the green-and-gold colours of Newton Heath, the club's original name back in the 19th century. And then they stepped it up a notch with a protest that was so strong and well supported that it prevented a match with Liverpool taking place at Old Trafford. Although the more outrageous aspects of their protest were widely condemned, the ensuing publicity was enormous and would undoubtedly have been heard loud and clear in the US homes of the owners.

The whole angry, bitter, divisive and ultimately pathetic ESL debacle certainly helped secure the place of the football fan at the heart of the game. And perhaps this new-found fan power could be put to future good use. Having a say on how VAR is used? Helping stamp out the scourge of racism? Getting a place in a club's boardroom? In Germany, at least 51 per cent of a club must be owned by fans and, of course, Bayern Munich – along with Paris Saint-Germain – were

significantly absent from the 12 clubs originally involved in the ESL. This whole improbable saga could prove an important stepping stone towards a bigger involvement in the game for fans.