



TACKLING THE GAME

PAUL PARKER

MY LIFE IN FOOTBALL



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Dealing with Racism

THERE WAS a lad who had the old Robinson Jam logo on his lapel and his blazer. He was far from the only one who was openly showing his ignorance. And I think I was far from the only black kid who'd have to run all the way home, almost three miles, across the old airfield at Hornchurch Aerodrome, jumping through mud, getting our trousers ripped after catching them on some rocks or a fence.

At school I'd get called names. All of the names. Did it bother me? Of course it did. But ten minutes later I'd shrug it off and forget it, because I had my mates around me. They were all white. Did I want them to stand up, to say something, to stop it? No. First, I didn't want anyone to fight my battles for me. I didn't want them to get involved. I'd see them all before school and we'd all go together. One of my mates gave me his bike – a very expensive bike – which he'd got from his dad, who was a single parent and had worked hard to give it to him. My mate knew he'd get a rollicking off his dad but gave me the bike to make sure I got home alright. I had to believe in that saying about sticks and stones. Words hurt me but didn't

affect me. Actions might have, if they'd have grabbed hold of me, but that never happened, thankfully. I never found out how far someone was willing to go.

I quickly accepted it. I didn't have a choice. I felt that, if I had, I'd have been questioned as a person. I didn't go to my mum and dad about it. Could I have done? Should I have done? Yeah, maybe. But they were working every hour they could to put food on the table. They couldn't afford the time to come to school and complain about something that was much bigger than them. Bigger than the schools and the teachers. They were facing the same thing at their own work. My sister and brothers were too.

In the late 1970s, the BBC aired a programme called *Roots*, which was about slavery in the United States. I remember that, while it aired, and afterwards, there was a really toxic racist atmosphere at school, almost like the programme had weaponised or provoked them. I guarantee that every black kid of my age would have suffered with abuse because of that programme. The lead character was called Kunta Kinte and that was what I was called. In the show he has his foot cut off to stop him escaping. My sister got called Kizzy because that was the name of one of the other characters.

We went to school every day. I don't think I ever missed a day. I didn't know it at the time, this was not the mindset I had at the time, but it's obvious looking back that none of those kids really understood what they were saying or doing. They were products of their environment, repeating what they'd heard elsewhere, being kids, trying to get a reaction. And they did

get a reaction from me, but just not a direct one. It gave me adversity and it provided me with something to prove myself against.

It was ignorance. Children aren't born racist; they're taught that sort of behaviour by parents, grandparents. I still remember the first time I went round to my ex-wife's house. I was about 17 or 18. We were having spaghetti bolognese. I didn't know how to eat it. Her granddad was there, and I went and sat in the front room with him after eating. He started talking, about the war, and he brought out the word wogs. I was sitting there open-mouthed when my girlfriend's dad came in and had to explain that he'd meant it referring to Italians. I just kind of froze, and it wasn't said again. Reflecting on that now, is it fair that I had to shoulder the burden of understanding? Maybe not. Yes, it was a bizarre situation, having it explained that he's not being racist, he's being xenophobic, and you're not the target, so that's meant to be okay. The modern retaliation is to hold somebody accountable and that means destroying their livelihood on the back of it. Did the grandfather mean any malice, or did he say the wrong word at the wrong time? Did he just need to be educated?

Racism is still a problem. But I believe it's a smaller problem as the world has become smaller, and I'm speaking over the course of generations, with interracial marriages and immigration. I speak from experience as someone who lived in Singapore for a few years. My kids went to school there. One day after school, one of my boys ran up to me and said he was going to stay with one of his friends, an Indian boy,

and pointed him out – he pointed him out by his trainers. I do believe that with each passing generation, racism is becoming a smaller issue in society.

However, it does remain an issue, and a high-profile one at that. Football is one of the most high-profile platforms that has a vehicle for fighting racism, and multiple vehicles for it to be seen. Maybe I was lucky, because I was so obsessed with sports, and I wasn't bad at it. That changed things for me, it changed the way I was seen. It helped me build relationships. Some might say it shouldn't be that way. Maybe so, but that was my life. Sport, for me, was a way to relate. Relating made communicating easier. In a lot of sports, you have to work with people. All the sports I was involved in, I was always with other people. So I had to converse. All of a sudden, people find that except for the bit that they can see on the outside, I'm no different on the inside.

I look back today on the last 40 or 50 years and my opinion is that attitudes towards racism have improved, at least on a living, everyday level, so much in that time. Black footballers started to feature more prominently in top-flight teams in the late 70s and I was no different to most in that I looked upon players like Laurie Cunningham, Brendon Batson and Cyrille Regis as gods. Those three, and Clyde Best, who played for West Ham, really got my dad's interest into football from cricket. They definitely paved the way, but I was so single-minded that already by then I was determined that it would be me and me alone who'd determine whether or not I'd be a professional. I do confess that Laurie Cunningham was a little

bit different because we'd see him on the streets of Hornchurch because he was seeing a girl around town – I think he actually married her. But here was a player who captured headlines, who played brilliantly. He was such a superb athlete. And he went on to play for Real Madrid and Manchester United. He had the character to go to Spain and go through everything there. He just looked to Real Madrid, and he just went, I've got to go. He challenged himself every single time and it was a challenge again for him on and off the park. I probably was inspired by that, because that's how I looked at it, to be perfectly honest.

I saw them all taking abuse. Yet I never thought that it was ever going to be as bad as it was at some games. It never made me once ever think about not playing football. John Barnes, Terry Connor, Des Walker. They all came through the same sort of environment. All of those kinds of players who played in that era, coming through the 70s and the 80s. Playing football against fans who support teams who have black players, and they love them, but as soon as you get the ball they say all the worst things. You can turn around and say, I'm not going to accept that. What can you do when maybe that person is walking up to you after a game asking you for an autograph, and you're wondering, was he one of those people making a monkey chants at you or another player? You just get on with it. You have to. You don't let anything stand in the way of where you want to go and what you want to be.

I went and watched West Ham a few times with my mates. I was getting spat on and called names while I was watching my local team play. It never, ever once put me off wanting to

play football. It's what I'd made my mind up I wanted to be. The only way I wasn't going to be a footballer was if someone told me I wasn't good enough, or if I didn't get selected. People ask if I think being black held me back a bit initially. Look, somewhere along the line, I must have come across through coaching or wherever it was at some point, someone who might have been racist, who may have been going out and saying things when he saw somebody black. I can only share my experience. Did I experience racism from a coach? Never once. I never saw it. It never crossed my mind. However, you might ask, was I looking for it? The answer is, no, I wasn't looking for it, because I was there to play football. I wasn't looking for excuses. And I should add that I never looked upon any racist abuse in my childhood as something that put me into a different category to my friends growing up. They had their own struggles. We were in categories of class – the haves and the have-nots.

I did experience racism from an *opposing* coach. After playing as a striker, and moving to winger, I started moving further back into right-back. So for as long as I was playing in front of crowds throughout my teens, I was close to the touchline. You hear everything from the crowd, and occasionally from the bench. One Saturday morning I was playing for Fulham's youth team at Chadwell Heath, West Ham's old training ground. I was up against Bobby Barnes, a kid superstar. He'd already played first-team football. Another of the young black lads of a generation to look up to. I wasn't going to make it easy for him on the day. I was having a decent game, when Eddie

Baily, the West Ham chief scout (and former Tottenham star) all of a sudden starts having a go at Bobby Barnes.

‘Come on, Barnes,’ he barks, ‘you should be getting past this coon.’

Terry Mancini, who was my youth-team coach, just lost his head. If he’d had any hair he’d have torn it out. John Lyall was the West Ham manager and, like Sir Alex in later years, would always attend the youth games. He made his presence known and gave Eddie Baily the curly finger. I got on with it and I carried on playing, and it was dealt with. Terry Mancini had his say afterwards.

Eddie Baily kept his job. There wasn’t a culture then of getting people the sack for something like that. Would I have wanted him to get the sack? Probably not, really. The idea of someone’s entire life being turned upside down because of something they’ve said, a very stupid thing, I don’t know – it doesn’t seem right.

I played a game for Fulham’s first team at Elland Road. I came on as sub. We never lost at Leeds so things were going well for us. I was up against Eddie Gray, the god of Leeds. Eddie dropped the shoulder, I was a little bit late and fouled him. It earned me a chant from the home fans: ‘There ain’t no black in the Union Jack.’ I was only 17. After the game, our manager, Malcolm Macdonald came up to me. Look, I don’t know if I really understood what they were saying – I knew they were being racist. I can’t remember how I felt but I know I must have seemed emotional, but Malcolm asked me if I was alright. I said I was fine.

‘Well,’ he goes, ‘you’ve got two choices. You either get on with it or you stop playing, if you can’t deal with it.’

So that was as sympathetic as it got. In another industry you’d probably go to HR. But he gave me two choices, and one of them I was never going to take. I went to Leeds on two or three occasions with Fulham. Then again with Queens Park Rangers. In my first season at Manchester United, we played Leeds at Elland Road three times in two weeks because we were drawn against them in both domestic cups. For the first time ever, the Leeds fans called me a red bastard as opposed to a black one. That was my introduction into just how much Leeds United fans hate Manchester United.

Football became much more high profile in the 1990s with Sky and the Premier League. The existence of racism in the game did, too. There was the incident with Eric Cantona at Crystal Palace with the racist fan. Attitudes were changing and stereotypes were becoming outdated. You had popular magazine television programmes like *Soccer AM* and Baddiel and Skinner’s shows – lad culture that would carry the casual racist stereotypes, such as the abuse given to Jason Lee, the former Nottingham Forest striker. As time went on there was the Kick It Out campaign and other various approaches to try to address what was going on, and then incidents that would bring it into the news cycle, like Luis Suárez’s abuse of Patrice Evra in 2011. Today, social media presents a completely different sort of problem, where anyone can say anything. It’s usually someone targeting somebody who has a profile because

they want some notoriety for themselves, and it doesn't matter how they get that attention.

Football isn't the owner of racism and it isn't the arbiter. Life is the arena where racism exists. That's where it happens. Yes, football provides a high-profile platform where attitudes can be challenged, but I don't think it can be effectively tackled by T-shirts or badges or taking a knee. I've experienced this myself so I can say it – getting abuse online, in my opinion, doesn't hurt me to the extent that I'd be bothered to track somebody down to find out what I knew anyway, that it was somebody wanting some attention. Of course, there ought to be accountability. Do we need more accountability than the world seeing that person for what they are? What about instead of having that person lose their job, have them go back into their job and face their colleagues. Today we have such a multicultural society that inevitably people are working with people from different cultures, different countries, different religions, different colour of skin. So why not make it uncomfortable by making them go in to face those people after what they've said.

Football can be the same as any workplace for that. Take the example of Enzo Fernández, the Chelsea player who filmed a racist chant about French people while on international duty with Argentina. He got caught up in something. We've got to remember how old he is as well. Footballers are still young men in their own way. When it comes to life skills, they're still quite young, and he's gone and got involved in something that probably they've been doing for quite a while and he's been the one to film it. All of a sudden everyone wants to call him

out and say Chelsea should get rid. Money's going to come into it. The biggest thing he's got to do is face the dressing room. Everyone had an opinion on what the black players were going to be saying to him when he got back to Chelsea. Maybe players would just go up to his face and challenge him because they'd socialised with him before, and their opinion of him from the person they know is that he's not racist. They just know he got caught up in something and he'd become a sheep. The education comes in facing those people he knows and sees every day.

The Suárez and Evra event from 2011 was one that disappointed me. It was obvious that Suárez was in the wrong – that part should have been straightforward. But it wasn't. Kenny Dalglish, a legend of the game, backed him, and made the players wear T-shirts in support of Suárez. Supporters were arguing in defence of him over the nuance of what he meant to say, and it caused incredibly hostile atmospheres in the game, which is already the biggest in England. They weren't supporting Suárez on the basis of improving understanding of racism; they were supporting him because the opposing player played for Manchester United. So, while football provides a platform for these things to be addressed in such a public way, it also creates conflict and confrontation that has nothing to do with the actual issue of racism.

My experience of racism has been that – not accounting for obvious individual incidents, and not discounting systemic racism – by and large it was mob mentality caused by ignorance, people following like sheep. It has improved as

society has become more multicultural and there has been more education and empathy. The rise of social media means that mob mentality is still there and is maybe even making something of a comeback, but there's now much greater individual accountability and, where that's the case, I do feel and believe that hopefully as we move into a new generation, that greater accountability will mean that racism becomes less of a problem.

Will it ever be eradicated? Sadly, in my opinion, not in a million years. I think that it benefits too many people. People can lobby and politically engineer based on their mobilising, empowering and weaponising racism in whatever manner they choose. People can use racism to create conflict as a means to their own end. As long as doing so can bring them power, or money, there will always be some who want to keep racism alive and thriving.