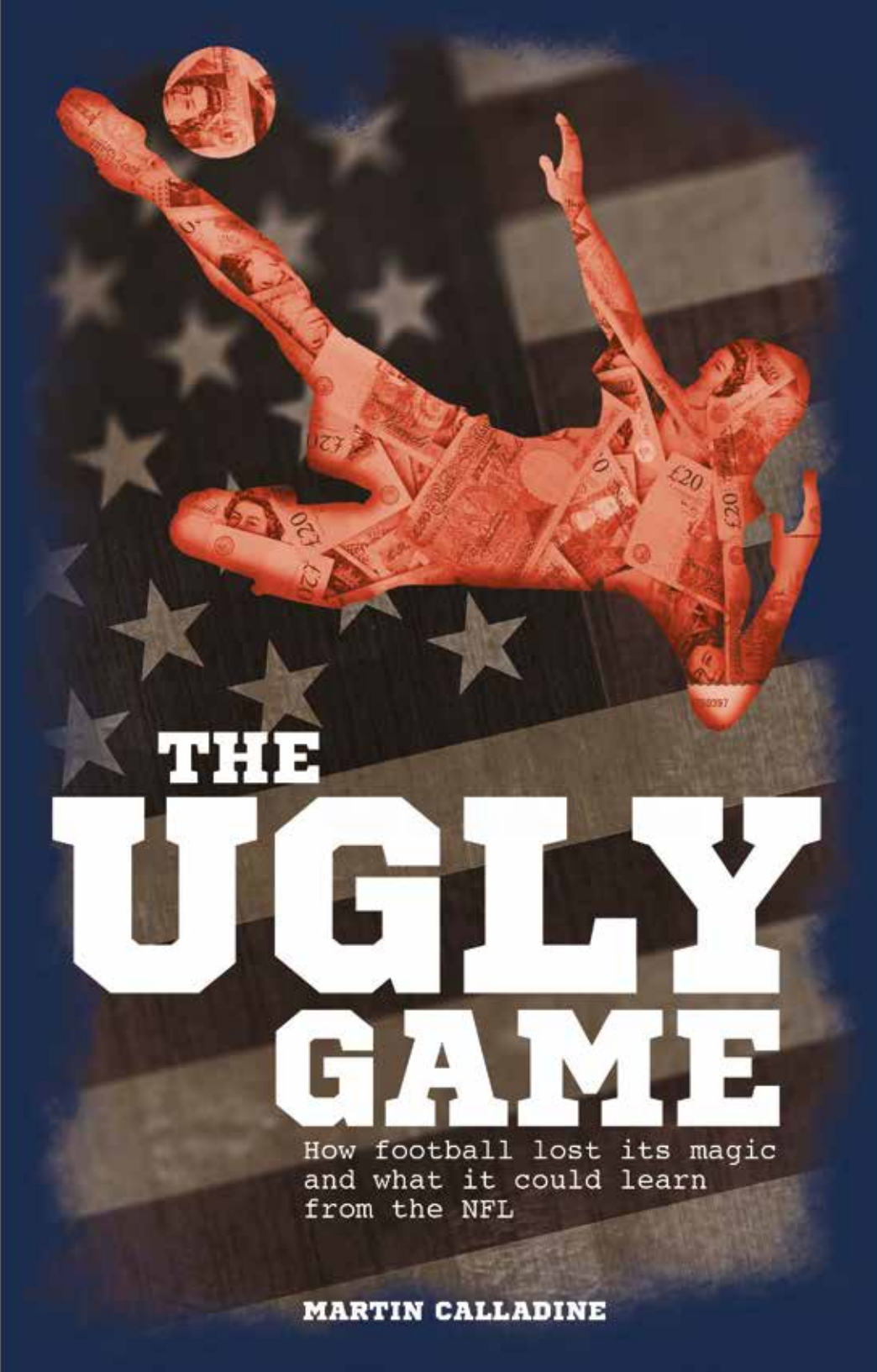

THE UGLY GAME

How football lost its magic and what it could learn from the NFL

MARTIN CALLADINE

Contents

Introduction

A FEW years ago I fell out of love not just with my football team, but with football altogether. With going to games, with *Match of the Day*, with 5 Live and midweek Champions League games, with the Premier League and La Liga, with Messi and Ronaldo, with the transfer window, with third-round day and the Road to Wembley. All of it.

This season, after living apart from football for several years, I got a proper divorce. I no longer know the name of my team's reserve left-back. I've no idea who Crystal Palace's assistant manager is. I couldn't even tell you England's current centre midfield pairing, let alone who I think it should actually be.

You may not have gone that far yourself, but if you've been married to the game for a long time I bet you've had at least a few rough patches. And I imagine you can identify, at least in part, with why it happened to me, and why I came to see that football was no longer the Beautiful Game.

* * * * *

With the sound down, football is a strange, otherworldly experience, like a computer simulation patiently mapping all the ways 22 men can be arranged on a patch of grass. If you are sleep-deprived, the effect is particularly pronounced, with the ball appearing to ping about as if compelled not by the players but sinister external influences. Doubly so if Stoke are playing.

It was 3am and I was awake again. In just a few hours I would have to be up for work on Monday morning. I flipped around the channels, hoping for the original *Die Hard* or *Predator*; something exciting enough to keep me awake but so completely familiar that I could switch off mentally and get back to sleep immediately my daughter's night-time feed was finished.

I had Saturday's *Match of the Day* recorded, the epitome of mindless, predictable viewing. But after just a few minutes I switched it off, unable to care about how Manchester City or Chelsea or Aston Villa were doing (the last of these, I know, isn't necessarily an unusual state of mind). I didn't know if it was tiredness clouding my thoughts, but I felt like I could happily never watch a game of football again. My daughter was deep in her bottle, eyes almost closed, one tiny hand lightly stropping my t-shirt, gurgling like Andy Carroll after a night out. I clicked on Channel 4 at random and was greeted by something quite startling.

It was a slow-motion replay, so slow in fact that, at first, the screen appeared frozen. Rising from the back of the picture, illuminated by floodlights and

camera flashes, a ball climbed into view, rotating on its axis with an almost mechanical intent and oblivious to the balletic violence of the rucking men below. As the ball traced a path towards the foreground, the camera began to pan, showing its trajectory, apex and eventual descent.

With impossible grace, an athlete appeared from below, so close to the camera he might almost have been in my lounge. He was already halfway through a smoothly executed leap, back arched like a high jumper, arms extended above his head, hands almost touching at the thumbs, fingers splayed. The ball made contact with his gloved fingertips, its spin deftly disarmed and the pass now ready to be pulled in.

At that moment, though, with the perfectly choreographed performance seemingly complete, another player appeared, little more than a blur in contrasting colours, and smashed into the catcher, shoulder first, with the force of a car t-boning another at a crossroads. The players ended in a heap, the ball rolled away and I winced in my seat, accidentally knocking the bottle's teat from my daughter's mouth so that the crowd's cheers and her protests became one.

The scene set off a series of rapid flashbacks that hit me like a Lee Cattermole tackle from behind. Memories of growing up in the 1980s. Memories of the NFL on Channel 4 presented by the wonderful Mick Luckhurst, a Brit abroad who, like a reverse Loyd Grossman, seemed permanently to be at war with his own speaking voice. Memories of getting to choose your own team, completely unconstrained by geography or family tradition. Memories of the Chicago Bears and The Fridge. Memories of rappers, whose records I wasn't allowed to play, wearing Raiders gear. Memories of pledging allegiance to Joe Montana or John Elway or Dan Marino. Memories of converting our daily lunchtime game of British Bulldogs into a rapidly-banned brawl with a ball. And, eventually, memories of starting going to my local league football club and putting all that shoulder-padded nonsense behind me.

I watched the rest of the game, my daughter asleep on my shoulder, and it felt like I'd been thrown a lifeline. I realised, with a warming sense of serenity, that I wasn't just overworked and dog-tired, but that I was completely sick of football. Bored with the England team, tired of hearing about Lampard and Gerrard's puzzling incompatibility, fed up with high ticket prices and atmosphereless games, angry at the financial ruin of so many once-great clubs, infuriated by the stockpiling of talent by a few title challengers and saddened by the total disregard for any notion of fairness.

So I returned to my childhood love: American football. I was amazed at what I discovered. Here was a game, the glitziest product of the most consumerist culture in the world, that, miraculously, seemed to be doing things the right way. At first it was difficult to acknowledge, like admitting to yourself that Robbie Savage has made a good point, but there was no avoiding it. The NFL is, I concluded, the closest thing to perfection there is in sport.

Football was the game of the 20th century, its elegant simplicity and universal appeal making it the first truly global sport. But, with the 21st century still young, it's a game showing its age, led astray by money; its self-interest making it increasingly a stranger to its audience.

The NFL, by contrast – despite its undeserved reputation among many as a silly pastime; a contrived vehicle for endless advertising – seems a sport able to handle money and fame without surrendering what sits at the heart of all great sports: a belief in open, fair competition.

In America you can buy almost anything. Anything that is but the Super Bowl. Because, remarkably, the NFL it is a sport where the worst team still gets the first pick of the best players. A sport where the amount clubs can spend is tightly controlled to prevent billionaires buying success. A sport where TV income is shared, where there's no prize money for winning the Super Bowl and where smaller clubs can hold on to their star players. A sport where young players have to earn their money, where black managers are the norm and where buying a team is more like a tightly regulated business than a used-car auction.

The NFL isn't without its flaws, of course. There's the legendary American distaste for draws[1], a lack of promotion or relegation, significant doping problems and a fixture system that can only be understood by those with a good pass at A Level maths.

But, like the growing army of British NFL fans – many of whom are also disenchanted with what the Premier League has become – I've found American football has rekindled my love of sport generally. It is, I'm going to argue in this book, a brilliant counter-example to those who feel that either nothing can be done about the direction of football or that any complaining is just pointless luddism.

To me, then, the NFL is a mirror into which English football must be forced to look. Not everything that happens there can or should be transposed to the Premier League; the solution to many of football's ills may be completely different. But there's no doubt in my mind that the NFL could be an invaluable provocation; a challenge to the people who run football to do better and to the fans who watch it to either fight harder for football's soul or be prepared to turn their backs on it.

This book assumes little knowledge of the NFL beyond a few basics, but a great deal of cumulative cultural exposure to football.[2] Each chapter examines football from a different aspect, contrasting it, often unfavourably, with what happens in the NFL. Sometimes the criticism is brutal, but it's mostly well-meant. I hope that it will be clear that I loved football (and still retain great affection for it), and that my anger and disappointment reflects the feeling that, rather than me leaving football, football left me.

One final note on terminology. When I refer to 'football', I always mean 'association football', never American football (despite my love of American sports, I'm not sure I could ever feel comfortable using the word 'soccer').

Welcome to *The Ugly Game*.

---

1 It's wonderful how upset draws make many American NFL fans. They happen no more than once or twice a year, yet are often greeted with perplexed and frustrated anger, like an Englishman being informed that a rail replacement service is in operation.

2 As I have found these last five years, following a near 20-year hiatus as a supporter, the NFL is an incredibly intricate sport, combining the best of rugby, basketball and Australian rules, with a level of tactical complexity that may exceed cricket.

1.

'I only expect one of you to come out of this room alive…'

Because a salary cap means you can't buy the title.

I USED to think that even Roman Abramovich despised John Terry. Despite his almost limitless riches, it must be galling – mustn't it? – to hand over more than £8m a year to a man whose very appearance seems to stir ancestral memories of the Victorian science of phrenology, with its belief that you might tell a criminal simply by the shape of his head.

And as soon as he's slid Terry a suitcase of undeserved riches over the table, there would've been another knock on the door. It's Frank Lampard's agent come to negotiate terms for another season of late bursts into the box and surprisingly accurate long-range shooting.

John Terry celebrating the collapse of the Soviet Union.

And will no one think of Sheikh Mansour? Not only is he paying Yaya Touré, Samir Nasri and Sergio Agüero more than the whole Swansea squad combined, but at one point or another he's also forked out for bench cloggers like £27m plodder Edin Džeko, square-jawed ball-squarer Gareth Barry and tenacious master-of-none James Milner. All three, along with many other expensively acquired fifth wheels, take home more money in thousands of pounds a week than they contribute in minutes on the pitch.

Liked Panini so much he decide to play for real. [3]

My mistake was to think that these were people like us. In fact, the kind of person who thinks sporting results should be as predictable as shopping trips probably sees players as objects, no different to a garage of sports cars.

Football is increasingly owned by two kinds of people: the heartless Randian businessmen, who think nothing exempt from the logic of profit, and the others who recognise no authority but their own needs. It's roughly equivalent to those who'd see no problem investing in an online human organ trading business and those who are already running on a black-market liver acquired from China.

Of course, good players aren't sports cars. They're a great deal rarer and less reliable, mostly one-offs or limited editions. At any one time, there are no more than a couple of dozen in Europe capable of giving you the edge. So if they're all parked in the same few garages, the race will tend to be less exciting, with fewer likely winners and an overall lower average speed.

---

3 As a seven-year-old, my pocket money allowed me to afford two packets of football stickers a week. For months a conclave of boys met in the playground every lunch break, rifling each other's spares and shouting 'got, got, got, got, need'. Until, one day, the resident rich kid got interested and his dad bought him a whole box from the village newsagent. He turned up the next day with a finished album and killed the whole game. As punishment, we refused to let him play British Bulldogs for a whole week, but the damage was already done…

At the end of July 2013, Betfair was offering odds of 750/1 or higher on 14 of the 20 Premier League clubs winning the 2013/14 title. In other words, without a ball being kicked, 70 per cent of the teams were deemed to have as close to no chance as makes no difference. Compare with the odds for the 2013/14 NFL season. Jacksonville, the bookies' lowest rated team in the entire league, were just 200/1 to win the Super Bowl. Twenty-six of the 32 teams had odds lower than 100/1.

The Premier League isn't yet a Scottish- or Spanish-style duopoly, where a long-running but no-longer-funny double act go through the motions, but the trend is clear (it's as though somehow Morecambe and Wise and The Two Ronnies mixed up, leaving Ernie Wise and Ronnie Corbett toiling joylessly round inner city Scotland in the winter, while Eric Morecambe and Ronnie Barker put on command performances in the more accommodating climate of Spain).

And it's not just the likelihood of your team winning the title that suffers. The greater the concentration of talent, the worse the overall standard of football. It can be entertaining occasionally to watch Chelsea whip Aston Villa 8-0, but great games of football – games worth watching for 90 minutes instead of a 90-second highlights package – have to involve two good teams. Which is why most Premier League games are now too tedious to watch live.

Particularly agonising are the teams in seventh or eighth. It's hard to believe – for all the money – how low the general level of technical ability is in squads that could, with a good run, qualify for a football lesson from a German team in next year's Europa League.

Even the 'big clubs' admit there's a problem, welcoming (publicly, at least) UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations. It's a strange kind of fair play, though – and one that will do nothing to increase the likelihood of Swansea or Norwich ever winning the Premier League. Broadly, you aren't allowed to spend more

'Ready to fight?'

on wages than your total income. Which is like staging a race where everyone is limited to roughly the kind of car they have now. Nice if you're already driving a Ferrari. Not so good if you are in a Mondeo.

In 2011/12, Man City spent £202m on wages, which is more than four times as much as Blackburn, West Brom, Wigan, Wolves, Norwich or Swansea. Only six teams in the Premier League spent more than one third of the amount City did. The results are predictable, with a strong relationship over time between money spent on wages and final league position.

The problem is that, according *The Guardian*[1], no club in 2011/12 spent more than 100 per cent of its income on wages. Indeed, in descending order, the top ten were Blackburn, QPR, Villa, City, Bolton, Sunderland, Everton, Fulham, Stoke and West Brom. This might even suggest that Financial Fair Play will protect only larger clubs from themselves while encouraging ever greater risk-taking for smaller clubs (it's one thing to spend every penny and just miss out on the title. But spend all you have just to stay in the Premier League and *then* get relegated and it's hello, bankruptcy).

Here's the point: a meaningful limit on player wages has to be low enough that everyone can afford it and it has to be uniform.

Which is exactly how it is in the NFL. The NFL salary cap has remained pretty much static for the last five years, allowing teams to spend a maximum of about £77m ($120m USD) a year on wages.

It's not as much as it sounds. The £77m has to cover all 53 members of the roster. Shared equally, that would be about £28,000 a week per player. Halve the figure to reflect the fact that Premier League squads have a maximum of 25 players and it would translate to about £40m per Premier League team. The only clubs who spent less than that on wages in 2011/12 were Wigan, Wolves, Norwich and Swansea. And all would've been within touching distance of the NFL rule than mandates clubs *must* spend a minimum of about 90 per cent of their salary cap (a rule which stops owners profiting from fielding a cheap team).

When a salary cap is even and low, things suddenly become more interesting in a number of different ways.

In the 21 years of the Premier League to the end of the 2012/13 season, just five teams had won the title. A further three teams had finished second.[4] In the same period, 11 different teams won the Super Bowl with a further ten making a losing appearance. This includes two Super Bowl titles for Green Bay, a community-owned team from a town of just over 100,000 people. Michael MacCambridge, a brilliant US sports writer, asked former Green Bay club president Bob Harlan about the continuing success of the club. Despite all its great history and nationwide support, Harlan said, the team simply wouldn't be viable in Green Bay but for the salary cap and NFL profit sharing.[2]

The most important thing the salary cap accomplishes is not that it becomes impossible to try and acquire the league's best player, but rather that it becomes

4 In English football, the shrinking pool of winners seems to be a trend going back to the post-war restoration of the top flight. In the 1950s, six different teams won the title. In the 60s it was seven. This was followed by five in the 70s, four in both the 80s and 90s and just three in the 2000s.

impossible to have a star player at every position – let alone City's stated aim of having two for each position. If you want to sign a big name, you have to pay the rest a lot less.

'I like it. I'll take three.'

Simply put, then, a club can't buy the title (had a cap been present in English football for the last ten years, we may even have seen fewer teams sold to foreign owners with more money than patience).

A cap doesn't appear to penalise star players either. Quite the contrary, in fact: the ten best-paid players in the NFL for the 2014/15 season all accounted for more than $15m – or one seventh – of their teams' salary cap (which would be like City paying someone £900,000 a week[5]).

But it comes with risks. Peyton Manning, who some consider the greatest quarterback of all time, took Indianapolis to the play-offs (a marker of a good season, like qualifying for Europe) in 11 of his 13 years with the team. In 2011, with a squad built around him – and paying him the lion's share of the team's salary cap – Manning got injured and missed the entire season. Unable to afford a good back-up, Indianapolis won only two of 16 games. At the end of the year it wasn't just the head coach who got fired, it was the general manager too – the person, like a director of football, responsible for player recruitment and wages.

There are no creative workarounds for the salary cap either. You can re-structure contracts, bringing forward or pushing back bonuses and wages into different years, but the cap always catches up with you eventually, forcing you to cut or trade players to meet a year's number. And because salary caps are agreed several years in advance, with no provision for the aggressive wage inflation of

5 Note to anyone reading this book in 2018 or later: £900,000 a week would once have been considered an excessive amount of money for a football player to earn.

the Premier League, teams know that bargain hunting and coaching will always be the best long-term strategy.

Occasionally, if salary cap negotiations between the players and owners fail, there is an 'uncapped year'. The last time this happened was 2010, allowing, in theory, teams to go on spending sprees. One such team was Washington, who brought forward a proportion of their players' contracts, paying them in advance with the aim of hoarding talent for future years. But, so central to the NFL is the salary cap, this was deemed to be attempting to gain an unfair advantage so, despite the year having no salary cap, Washington were fined $36m.

Rather than pay from the owner's pocket, the team had that figure deducted from their next two years' salary caps – and then divided up among the rest of the teams in the league. In other words, in the NFL, instead of a fine that can be paid from a chairman's change jar, the punishment for over-spending on players is a direct cut in what you can spend in following years. Imagine the look on the face of the already perma-baffled Roman Abramovich if that had been Chelsea. In the Premier League clubs just don't hand down those kinds of punishments to each other.

'I'll have the biggest piece.' 'Me too.' 'And me.'

The salary cap has a pronounced sharpening effect on players too. In English football, if you're playing badly, you're just short-changing the owner and, to a lesser extent, the fans. In the NFL, you're robbing the team. There's no strolling through midweek cup ties or only turning up for big games. Every player has to justify his salary every week. If you don't – especially if someone is playing like a star and earning a new deal – you might be on the chopping

block. Every contract a club hands out has an opportunity cost; every penny a player is paid is money that could've been used on other players.

Remember when John Terry was reported to have requested an 'unlimited parity' clause with Chelsea so that he'd always be the joint-highest paid player, regardless of what anyone else was earning? Good luck with that in the NFL. If you hit 30 and you aren't up to playing every game – and playing it brilliantly – your dodgy knees won't touch the ground on the way out of the door. Unless, that is, you're prepared to take a massive pay cut and play for the going rate. When did a Premier League player last do that?

Every plutocrat's starter superstar: Shaun Wright-Phillips (shown here at full size.)

Recently Baltimore, the 2012/13 Super Bowl champions, made their quarterback Joe Flacco the then best-paid player in NFL history, with a contact worth £80m over six years. The only way they could afford it was by letting seven other of their best players go and replacing them with youngsters. It would be like City winning their first title in years and then funding a huge new contract for Agüero by giving free transfers to Nasri, Kompany and Silva. A club like Chelsea might've been able to afford to add André Schürrle to their squad, but it's highly unlikely they'd also have been able to sign Diego Costa *and* get cover from an experienced player like Drogba. Compromises have to be made.

As I've said, top players still get paid for the difference they make. Which is as it should be. I've never minded how much Ronaldo gets paid; he earns every penny.[6]

6 Well, more precisely, Ronaldo is vastly, obscenely over-paid. But since he is a genuine once or twice in a generation talent, and clearly is a brilliant professional, I'm less bothered by it than the money mediocre players bring in. However, ultimately, all players – Ronaldo included – should be paid less.

What really began my alienation from football was when *decent* players or promising players or inconsistent ones got big pay days.

In the NFL, such players find their agents have much less leverage.

Recently, for example, Pittsburgh had two talented young wide receivers, Mike Wallace and Antonio Brown, coming to the end of their contracts. Each had shown great promise, leaving Pittsburgh in a situation that any Premier League club would be delighted by.

However, with the salary cap hanging over them and holes elsewhere on the team, Pittsburgh decided they could only afford to pay one of them. And, since neither player was yet excelling consistently, the team declined to offer top dollar, telling Wallace and Brown that there was one contract and it would go to the first player who signed.

Wallace, who at the time was considered the better player, held out for more money while Brown took the deal, getting $43m over six years. Wallace, meanwhile, was left to play out the last year of his contract on $2.7m before moving to a big money free agent deal with Miami.

Imagine that. Frank Lampard and John Terry come to the office, both wanting a new deal. But this time it's you sat behind the desk. You stand up, place a suitcase of money on the floor and look both players in the eyes. As you close the door behind you, you say, 'I only have one suitcase. I only expect one of you to come out of the room alive.'

And that's why a salary cap is brilliant: it frustrates the players, agents and trophy-hungry owners whose interest in pushing up salaries forces everyone else to join the Premier League's financial *danse macabre*.

It's a discipline that football desperately needs. Clubs' lives depend on it.