

MATT COUGHLAN

# TURNCOAT



*How I Stopped  
Supporting Arsenal  
and Found a  
New Team*

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## *Chapter 1*

# The problem with modern football

TURNCOATS, GLORY hunters, fair weather fans, hipsters, tourists. All disparaging terms used by real football fans to describe those who aren't dyed-in-the-wool, been-to-every-game-home-and-away, grew-up-around-the-corner-from-the-ground, always-get-behind-the-team, obsessives like themselves.

I certainly mocked school friends jumping on the Manchester United bandwagon, tutted at people leaving the ground early, and shook my head at day trippers more interested in taking selfies than watching the game. Now I was thinking of becoming one of them. After spending most of my life supporting Arsenal, I had fallen out of love with the club. Sixteen years as a season ticket holder were over. I was done with supporting a football team.

It hadn't always been this way. Things started out like a beautiful love affair. My infatuation developed after my best mates at primary school introduced me to

Arsenal. Fortunately, they didn't follow Liverpool, who were attractive, yet distant. Nor were they some of the few who followed West Ham, which was the equivalent of what you might go for at 2:00am if all the other clubs were taken.

Arsenal looked great in their red shirts with white sleeves. Even the name had a mysterious allure. I knew little about them at first. Small things like a catalogue for the club shop would be something I could stare at for hours on end. All I knew was they were doing well in the league and were about to go head to head with Liverpool in a title decider at Anfield.

It was May 1989. I was nine years old and therefore not able to stay up and watch the match. My parents had no interest in football, but they did like watching the news. I couldn't sleep. I waited for the news to come on to hear the result. I crept towards the stairs, peered through the railings and caught Michael Thomas's winning goal. I didn't appreciate the significance of the moment at the time, but I went to bed happy and could go into school the following week and bask in the reflected glory of supporting the champions. Lording it over the Liverpool-supporting Essex boys was particularly sweet.

A few years later, I progressed to my first date. I was adamant the setting should be against Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest, but a postponement and the rearranged fixture falling midweek put paid to that. I turned down the chance to see the 1991 FA Cup semi-final defeat to Spurs and more bizarrely, the last

home game of the season where Arsenal were crowned champions and dispatched Coventry City 6-1.

After giving up on seeing Arsenal play Nottingham Forest, I settled for a home game against Liverpool in 1992. My dad took me and my brother to Highbury on a glorious spring day, with my brother supporting Liverpool just to be obnoxious. As a first date, it couldn't have gone any better. The art deco stands and bowling green surface looked stunning. Arsenal ran out comfortable 4-0 winners, with Anders Limpar chipping Mike Hooper from the centre circle to round things off in style.

A week later, we returned for the last game of the season at home to Southampton. It was to be the final match before the demolition of the famous North Bank terrace. My first game on the North Bank would be its last. I remember staying on at the end to applaud the team, after a 5-1 win in which Ian Wright clinched the Golden Boot award. As we made our way out of the ground, other supporters were hanging on for a few last moments, or chiselling away bits of concrete for a souvenir, and there was a clear sense of loss in the air.

With the ground being redeveloped, I had fewer chances to go to games. My dad started supporting Charlton to stop arguments between me and my brother over whether Arsenal or Liverpool were the better team, and then they both started watching the Addicks. My mum gamely took me to several Arsenal matches. She put up with the swearing and incomprehensible nature of one of the world's most simple and popular

sports, mainly so she could swoon over Anders Limpar. Although, oddly, not because he was our only creative midfielder.

Being a lone Arsenal fan in what had become a Charlton-supporting household came with one substantial benefit when Arsenal faced Charlton in a pre-season friendly at The Valley in 1993. My dad arranged for my brother and me to be mascots for our respective teams. I got to meet the team who had won the FA Cup and League Cup the previous season and would lift the European Cup Winners' Cup. I remember in the dressing room beforehand, players took the mickey out of David Seaman for his indecisiveness, saying 'Mine, yours, keeper's, leave it' to him repeatedly. Paul Merson sang 'I'm a secret lemonade drinker' from an R White's commercial, which turned out to be the least troubling of his addiction problems.

In the warm-up I gave Seaman no chance with my first shot, so I could say I had scored against him. What I couldn't seem to do was lift the rock-hard ball off the ground. Seaman wasn't going to dive for a low shot and I couldn't just keep passing them into the corner, so I had to get them near enough for him to catch them, but still wanting to put a few away. I managed to score five past him this way, which is something I continue to boast about to this day.

Another up close and personal moment came when I bought a season ticket with my mate, Bisonhead, in 1996. Choosing our seats involved going through the marble halls and walking around the perimeter of the



pitch to look at the seats. Getting so close to the pitch, even when it was unseeded, was a genuine thrill.

More thrills were to come when Arsène Wenger took over and soon delivered the Double. A Tony Adams piledriver capped a rampant 4-0 win over Everton to seal the title at a bouncing Highbury. This was followed by an FA Cup Final win over Newcastle United at a baking Wembley. Supporting Arsenal didn't feel like it would get any better than driving back from the game in my clapped-out Ford Fiesta with Bisonhead and his brother decked out in wigs and rosettes, scarves flapping from the windows, and a dubious cover of Donna Summer's 'Hot Stuff' recorded by the team blaring from the stereo.

Things did get better with more titles and cup wins. The fast-paced attacking football became turbo-charged, with Thierry Henry, Robert Pires and company delivering moments of incredible sporting prowess to dismantle visiting teams. They were a genuine pleasure to watch. From my seat just behind the goal in the Clock End, I was close to the action and felt part of something special. Not least when I was clearly visible on camera celebrating an Henry wonder strike against Manchester United, or when Kanu and I exchanged salutes during one of his goal celebrations.

I got to know a few of the regulars around me and we ended up travelling to several cup finals in Cardiff together, which was notable for one of the group falling asleep in a pub toilet and missing the first half of the 2005 final. Luckily, he made it into the ground in time

for the penalty shoot-out win, which we didn't realise at the time would be the last trophy win for almost a decade.

Until this point, even the setbacks still felt like minor blips on an upward trajectory. The crushing defeat to Manchester United in the 1999 FA Cup semi-final replay was at least a pulsating encounter. Seeing two teams at the top of their game slug it out was pure sporting theatre. There was the euphoria after a deflected Dennis Bergkamp equaliser, sparking celebrations where I ended up about a block away from my seat having lost the contents of my coat pockets. Delight at Roy Keane's sending-off and Phil Neville's concession of a last-minute penalty was followed by despair at Bergkamp's easily-saved spot kick. And the exhaustion of extra time and mixture of despondency and admiration when Ryan Giggs capitalised on a series of defensive errors for one of the most overrated goals in FA Cup history.

A shock late turnaround in the final of the same competition a few years later, at the hands of Liverpool's Michael Owen, spurred the team on to another Double the following season. All the while, the attacking football made every home game a must-see event, especially so in the unbeaten 'Invincibles' season. The crowning glory would have been winning the Champions League in 2006. In the last season at Highbury, the team pulled off famous victories over Real Madrid and Juventus, before facing Barcelona in the final. It wasn't to be.

Arsenal moved into the Emirates and I chose my seat through a computer simulation, expecting to be sitting

there until old age. I got to know a new bunch of regulars, who had a shared dislike for the referee Mike Dean and would come out with inadvertent witticisms like ‘Get a fucking move on Howard, you fucking Tourette’s cunt’ aimed at Everton’s procrastinating goalie.

The lustre of a shiny new stadium soon faded, and I was left watching the same old storyline unfold in a soulless concrete bowl. Moneyed clubs dominated the league and Arsenal lagged behind. Hope diminished and the team’s defensive problems went unresolved year after year. Each season would see a bad run of form to end any trophy hopes, before the team would rally to finish fourth.

Fans expected better for their money. Things got fractious in the stands. The arguments between those who wanted Wenger out and those who continued to back him became more heated. My overriding feeling was apathy. I questioned the sacrifices I had made to make sure I was at every home game, and the guilt I felt for the ones I missed because of a badly planned holiday, a monumental hangover, or not realising a kick-off time had been moved.

I planned to make a clean break and not renew my season ticket at the end of the 2011/12 season. My last game was a 3-3 draw with Norwich City. Slack defending left Arsenal’s hopes of a fourth-place finish, and Champions League participation, in the balance. This sounds spoilt. It wasn’t a calamitous relegation, the club going out of existence, or some other major reason to stop going. It was the monotony of each season

following the same pattern, the lack of ambition of the owners who continued to milk supporters for every penny, and the deteriorating quality on the pitch.

Going to games had stopped being joyful and became more of an obligation. Sure, true supporters stay with their club through thick and thin, and this was hardly thin. The problem was Arsenal no longer felt like a club to be part of. They were a business providing a service: an exceedingly expensive service at just under £1,000 a season for the cheapest seats; a service that no longer provided the customer with what they wanted. I didn't want guaranteed trophies. I just hoped that we would do our best to compete. Star player Robin van Persie must have felt the same way when he left that summer.

The new owner, who had bought into the club almost unnoticed during a period of relative success, appeared more interested in balancing the books than investing in the team. Wenger was no longer capable of recreating the magic of his early years, but it wasn't clear whether anyone else could propel Arsenal back into the elite under such financial restrictions. Even if the owner moved on, the best that could be hoped for was an oligarch, or leader of a dubious regime, interested in enhancing their image with some on-field success.

Elite football was becoming less attractive, with the super-rich asserting their dominance. The game was about amassing money, rather than bidding for glory. It prioritised the safety of a league finish over cup success, participation in European competition over trying to

win a trophy. Television deals were more important than the fans. Games would be moved to all sorts of times, so the ritual of going to a Saturday game, with a 3pm kick-off, died out.

I wanted to watch games at Highbury, with its tight stands, its history, and an atmosphere that was better than the Emirates and sometimes better than a library. I wanted to go every other Saturday afternoon, with the odd midweek fixture for the special feeling of watching a game under the floodlights. I wasn't so worried about seeing one of Wenger's great teams. Even a dour George Graham side could provide moments of entertainment and would at least put in the effort. Like a lot of fans, I wanted to travel back in time to the game I knew as a boy.

It was time to move on. I wasn't looking to move on to a better, more attractive team to flaunt in Arsenal's face like Van Persie. I thought I might still go to the odd Arsenal match. In the end, once I had broken the habit, I wasn't interested in navigating the various membership and ticketing requirements for a midweek 'category C' match. The Norwich City game remains my last. I sold my old shirts and programmes and kept just the memories and the autograph book from my day as mascot.

I didn't even watch many games on television. The notable exceptions were FA Cup finals, which had always been the one game I was guaranteed to have tuned into since childhood. Arsenal's final against Hull in 2014 was a chance to end Wenger's nine-year trophy drought. I told friends I would be a picture of Sven-

Göran Eriksson-like calm watching it in the pub and not the ranting maniac they were previously accustomed to. This all went out of the window when Hull took a 2-0 lead. My celebrations at Arsenal's comeback showed I still cared.

The cup wins around this time papered over the cracks and the arguments pro- and anti-Wenger grew louder. I looked on, having made my decision a few years earlier and it was sad to see a great era peter out the way it did. My interest was piqued in the post-Wenger aftermath, even if it was mild annoyance when Unai Emery's second season unravelled. I wanted to get back into football, be part of the pub conversation again. I didn't want to go back to watching Arsenal, but I wanted to go to games once more.

I had enjoyed the atmosphere of games I had watched on trips abroad to Germany and Belgium. I was keen to find that authentic football experience of terraces, beer and communal singing back home. Going to Leyton Orient with friends had been fun, but they weren't my team and it was still league. I wanted to explore non-league football, which felt more like the authentic experience I was craving.

My plan was to play the field like a newly single man coming out of a long-term relationship. I intended to see clubs in the London and Essex area and hoped to find 'the one'. The question was: was I prepared to face the social stigma a divorcee would have faced generations ago and commit the ultimate taboo of switching my allegiance and becoming a turncoat?