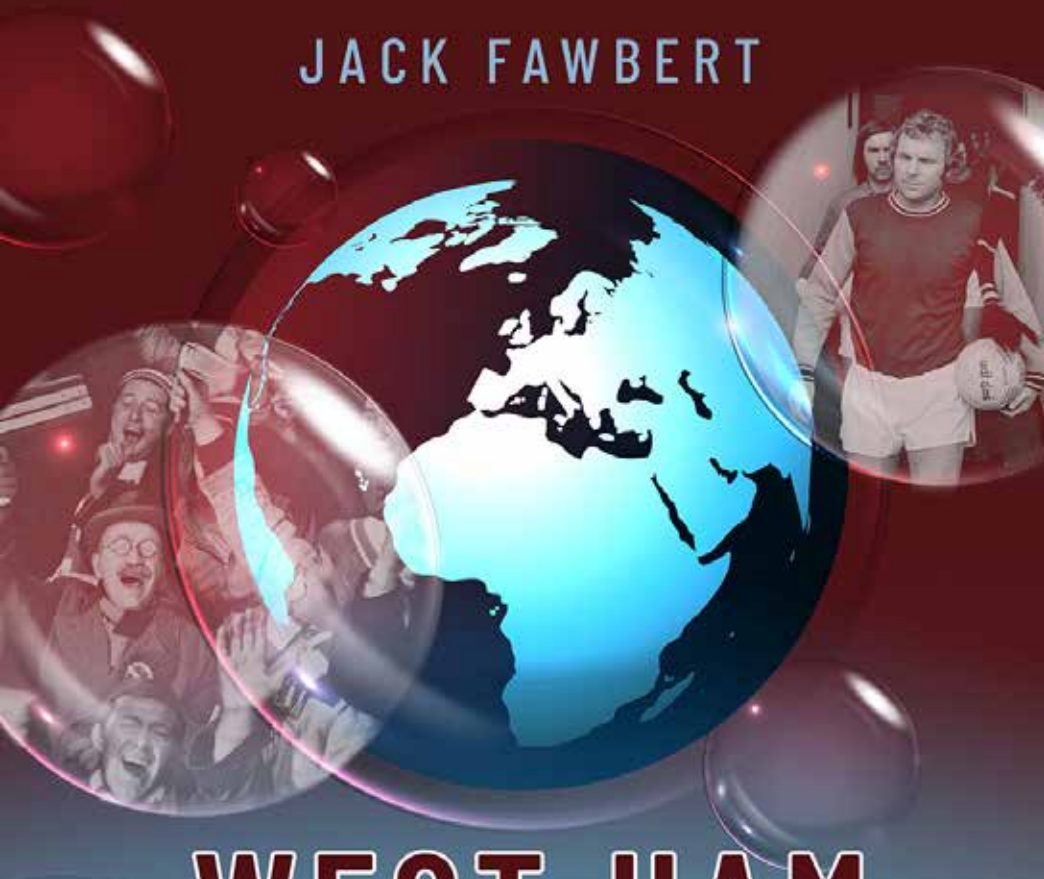
JACK FAWBERT



WEST HAM UNITED

From East End Family to Globalised Fandom

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1

From the Local to the Global

'MODERN', ORGANISED games, as opposed to the more traditional 'folk' games of the Middle Ages, originated in the public schools in the 19th century as a way for masters to curtail the rowdiness and disorderliness of upper-class boys and thereby regain control. By the early 19th century, boys had become increasingly unruly to the extent that, for example, they frequently launched attacks not only on local people but also against their middle-class masters whom they considered as their social inferiors. At many of these repositories of privilege, boys also played violent and disorderly 'mob games' that they had learnt from watching the leisure pursuits of the 'lower orders' in the communities from which they came.

Reforming headmasters like Edward Thring at Uppingham and, most notably, Thomas Arnold at

Rugby tried to direct the boys' aggression to more 'noble' pursuits by converting these games into more rule-bound activities. The boys were encouraged to learn valuable 'muscular Christian' lessons about leadership, subordination to order, cooperation, fair play, discipline and deference to team spirit from these reformed games that they would then take on to university and, crucially, later life as gentlemen amateurs. One of these organised games, football, thus acted as a metaphor for life in modern capitalist societies; a set of moral instructions about 'playing by the rules'.

Between 1845 and 1862 the seven main public schools put their rules in writing. In 1848 and again in 1856 there were attempts at a standardised set of rules called the Cambridge rules, but these were not universally accepted. Later, at a series of meetings at the Freemasons' Tavern in London in 1863, representatives of the public schools, Oxbridge and 11 London clubs, a common set of rules were agreed. The Football Association was thus established by ex-public schoolboys and the first FA rulebook was written. Charles Alcock, a public school old boy, then founded the FA Cup in 1871.

Early clubs were dominated by public school old boys and university graduates. Wanderers, for example,

the first winners of the FA Cup in 1871, included four old Harrovians, three old Etonians and one each from Westminster, Charterhouse, Oxford and Cambridge. The Royal Engineers were the winners of the next three FA Cups. They were a team of ex-public schoolboys. All commissioned officer ranks in the armed forces at that time came from public schools; a high proportion still do.

The 'Corinthian spirit' of the 'gentleman amateur' was hegemonic during this period. For example, it was considered ungentlemanly to demand payment for playing. A hegemony of 'sportsmanship' and 'playing the game' based on aristocratic notions of chivalry was encoded into football. It was also considered 'cheating' to train. Football was a pastime that wasn't to be taken too seriously. A 'gentleman' was perceived to be someone who could win without sweating and without appearing to try too hard. 'Gentlemen' were assumed to win simply because they were 'naturally' superior. Adherence to the rules was important and players were obliged to accept the referee's decision without question. Indeed, if a referee gave a penalty against Corinthians, a leading gentleman amateur team of the day, they would withdraw their goalkeeper to allow the other team to score because they wouldn't want to be accused of gaining an unfair advantage.

At the same time there was increasing concern among this elite during the 19th century about the growing geographical and social divide that was opening up between the social classes and the squalor and degradation in newly urbanising, industrial areas that had been wrought by the Industrial Revolution; a situation that was fuelling growing unrest through strikes and demonstrations. Chartism, various socialist movements and the growing strength of emerging trade unionism, especially New Unionism in the latter part of the 19th century, were all developments that created concern among the elite classes that uncontainable disorder could break out at any moment.

They thought that organised games such as football could not only help to heal the class divide but also would act as a form of moral instruction in terms of the values that were encoded into such games. The wealthy became enthusiastic devotees of disseminating 'respectable' games to commoners, as long as the lower orders 'knew their place' i.e. that the gentlemen amateurs would always be the elite players. They wanted to 'return' football to the common people in reconstructed forms as they believed it would be 'beneficial' to promote class conciliation and cohesion and to spread ruling-class values to the most deprived and feared working-class urban areas. From

the 1860s the working class in such areas were the object of the moralising influence of a civic bourgeois class who were keen to curtail all intemperance and 'uncivilised' behaviour. Following the 1884 Reform Act, which extended the franchise to all working men, businessmen were also keen to demonstrate their democratic legitimacy. The colonising zeal of the public school sportsmen was, therefore, welcomed by local businessmen in the most deprived, and what they regarded as most depraved, working-class areas. Indeed, muscular Christian missionaries flocked to these areas.

Much of this missionary work was performed through churches, schools and youth clubs, but many muscular Christian missionaries also became local employers and created leisure pursuits as a way of integrating their respective workforces into more harmonious relationships with their employers. For example, Stoke City, Crewe Alexandra and Manchester United were all created by railway companies, Coventry City emerged from the Singer sewing machine factory and Arsenal were a product of the Woolwich munitions factory. Team identities were constructed to reflect the character and the imagined communities of their founding localities as Christian missionaries hoped to promote deeper forms of shared

identity and solidarity at local and civic, rather than at social class, levels.

Nevertheless, from the formation of the Football Association the gentlemen amateurs dominated the game, its results, its governing bodies and its culture for 20 years. For the first 11 years from its inauguration in 1871 the FA Cup was won by teams dominated by gentlemen amateurs. However, because of working-class involvement, this was gradually changing. In 1879, for example, Darwen, a small Lancashire working-class team, managed to draw twice against the supposedly invincible Old Etonians in the FA Cup before the famous London amateur gentlemen finally scraped through at the third attempt.

But in 1883 there was a major shock when Lord Kinnaird's Old Etonians were beaten in the FA Cup Final by Blackburn Olympic, a team founded as recently as 1878 and composed largely of working men; mainly mill workers but also weavers, spinners, a dental assistant, a plumber, a cotton worker and an iron foundry worker. The Olympic team took a very professional approach to the final. They trained assiduously for the match in Blackpool and even chose their diet carefully in the week preceding the encounter. The upper-class amateur gentlemen footballers frowned on this professionalism and particularly on the growing

practice of paying players to play football. They thought it would encourage gambling, partisanship and the ethos of winning at all costs. They thought it would transform football from a morally virtuous and pleasurable leisure activity into simply a job of work and turn players into highly unsuitable role models for young, working-class men.

The final was a bitter struggle that went to extra time with the Old Etonians determined not to lose to what they regarded as working-class 'oiks'. The winning goal was finally scored by a cotton spinner, Jimmy Costley. This was just the start of domination by teams made up mostly of paid, professional, working-class men. In fact, a team comprised mainly of upper-class gentlemen never won the FA Cup again. Rogan Taylor, in *Football and its Fans: Supporters and their Relations with the Game 1885–1985* says, 'As their amateur, Corinthian vision of football dissolved into a fiery reality of private limited companies competing with each other with professional players, the upper-class "gents" who had midwifed the game swiftly abandoned the progeny on the nearest doorstep.'

However, the speed of the change should not be overstated. It was perhaps a more gradual disillusionment with what they had created than the quote from Taylor implies. In 1888, for example, Preston North End's

FA Cup Final side, although comprised mainly of ex-miners and tradesmen 'included a surgeon, a master at the local Catholic grammar school and a solicitor's clerk' according to the 24 March 1888 edition of the *Preston Herald*.

Along with the appropriation of the playing of the game by the working class came the rise of working-class spectatorism. Indeed, participation in football remained a minority pastime throughout the 19th century, whereas spectatorism was adopted by large numbers of working-class men as an alternative form of entertainment to the music hall. Working-class spectators, or more precisely 'fans', brought a very different culture to the game from the upper-class gentlemen. The Blackburn Olympic victory in 1883 heralded a turn that threatened a loss of control of the culture of the game to the working class and deeply disturbed sections of the elite. The arrival in London for the following year's final of masses of Blackburn Rovers supporters 'up for the Cup', was described by the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 31 March 1884 as, 'an incursion of northern barbarians on Saturday – hot blooded Lancastrians, sharp of tongue, rough and ready … a northern horde of uncouth garb and strong oaths. A tribe of Sudanese Arabs let loose in the Strand would not excite more amusement and curiosity.'