



Policing racist behaviour from football

by Simon Belt

Football is regarded by many as the UK's national sport, and Bill Shankly's ironic retort that ***it is more important than life***

rings true for many - at least once a week during the playing season. The importance of national football finals like the FA Cup see fans pay ridiculous amounts of money to go and see their team reach the highpoint of national prestige - and how good it is this year to see a couple of North West teams there representing the national sport. So isn't it reasonable to expect the sport's representation of the nation to also include a representation of our behavioural norms?

As a kid, I grew up supporting Leeds United in the glory days of Don Revie, somewhat oblivious to the reputation they had with over fans - I just thought everyone loved them for being, well **Super Leeds**

. The only people I knew that didn't support Leeds were the posher types who liked rugby or cricket - but as Yorkshire teams did well at those too it was of little concern.

It was only when leaving Leeds to explore a little more of the world that I realised that **Super Leeds**

were also known as

Dirty Leeds

, which I've always understood as simple jealousy by football fans with a taste for prawn sandwiches rather than fish and chips. As I began to knock around more political types though, being known as a Leeds United supporter elicited claims of supporting a racist club, or having racist fans. Going to schools that bridged some contrasting social milieu, I definitely did experience some polarisation and racism. Interestingly enough it wasn't so much from the

children who played or supported football as they seemed more relaxed about their friends and socialising across social groups. And yet it was the association with

Leeds United

rather than Yorkshire Cricket Club (with their Yorkshire born player criteria) that drew the ire from the politicians I knocked around with. As I didn't support Leeds for any political reason, I just thought focussing on some of their fans' beliefs or behaviour was off target, and suggesting I disown the club of my childhood or stop others supporting them was bizarre. If anything it encouraged me to take politics rather more seriously and not be so distracted by football - as politics really is not a matter of life or death.

Now, whilst football fans have always been herded about by the police for as long as I can remember, what appears to be a recent development is the increasingly personalised focus on policing the behaviour individual football fans. With all seater stadiums, closer integration of stewards into policing and CCTV that can monitor the personal speech and gestural behaviour of fans at matches, there is no much greater scrutiny of what's said and done, with fans facing lifetime bans from grounds without any criminal prosecutions or charges being made. The role of institutions surrounding football has shifted to the management of this public space around some very dubious criteria. Fans aren't the only people being scrutinised in the sport now though, as we post match comments increasingly focussing on allegations of the racist behaviour or speech of players as well as the fans.

Today though sees this process is cranked up another notch with the first meeting of **FIFA's** new ' t

taskforce against racism and discrimination

' and will present its initial findings at FIFA's annual congress on 30-31 May. FIFA president Sepp Blatter said of the taskforce: "We have to work on two fronts. First on education, and for that FIFA has a fantastic network through its 209 member associations. But besides that, we also need to have stronger sanctions. We have seen that fines achieve little, but point deductions and exclusion from competitions could be more effective measures. We will now have a task force with experts in this area who I am sure will help us achieve our objective of kicking discrimination and racism out of football."

As someone who enjoys watching football, I don't see that this will enhance the sport. Surely the sport should be managed around the rules of the game and what goes on in the heads of the players or the fans should be of no concern to the outcome of two teams playing to win, subject to the rules of the game. Adding the impact of the fans to a team sport, means incidental behavioural activities or ideas expressed by the fans of opposing teams will increasingly become a focus, detracting from the on pitch game. With racism officially defined by the actual or potential hurt experienced by the victim, there's a whole can of worms being opened up for the sport. This extension of the contest between two teams to include the behaviour of their fans off the pitch is increasingly justified as a matter of employment law and the need to provide a safe environment for footballers to work in. Not only will we have more pantomime of players threatening to walk off the pitch for health and safety reasons, but we're quite likely to have match officials walking off because their parentage is questioned openly at work. Football is historically a release from work, a place for fans to let off steam and have banter like nowhere else, so focussing it around the employment rights of players rather than the fans is going to reshape the game profoundly.

As for the politics of it all, well be careful what you wish for as we could well end up with both politics and sport becoming a right of mess. If politicians give up contesting big ideas, and retreat from the public sphere into managerial committees, professional finger pointers to tell us how to behave, and hands-off agencies more designed to avoid accountability than liberating management, we're more likely to get a personality led two fingers to politics than better governance. Do we really want more of the **Boris** and **UKIP** types? They are entertaining, sort of, but really some coherent and strident politics in the political sphere would surely be better.

Yes, I know politics isn't flavour of the month, but having our guardians of sport decide what constitutes politics and how we should behave in public is surely only going to make politics an even harder task for those who take it seriously and think it matters more than sport. Handing politics over to the numpties who have enough trouble organising a comedy act at a sporting awards ceremony is asking for trouble. I mean get this. The **PFA** (Professional Footballers Association) awards ceremony last weekend invited a popular American black comedian **Reginald D Hunter**

, presumably to show how worldly wise they are. I know comedy acts aren't the same as politics and that's why they're comedians and not politicians, and that the PFA really shouldn't reduce politics to the banal and formulaic, and most other people know that. That's just the point

though, as the PFA chairman Clarke Carlisle issued an unconditional apology to everyone who was offended when he used the

n-word

in his routine - and those that weren't, and then ask for their money back because that sort of behaviour won't be tolerated by them in case it sends the wrong message.

It really isn't just a gaff for the PFA to be obsessed with racism as a behavioural and linguistic issue - just when you thought things couldn't get any worse, **Kick It Out** chairman **Lord**

Ouseley

hopes Fifa's anti-racism and discrimination taskforce can eradicate a "nastiness" unique to football, "We don't see that sort of nastiness in other sports," said Lord Ouseley, chairman of the anti-racism campaign. Just in case you didn't understand the protection he recommends the vulnerable at work be offered, he added "Referees have a responsibility for the wellbeing of players on the pitch and that includes not being abused". This is surely no good for the game of football and to have people with such a degraded view of football and its fans dictate politics to us is of no benefit to democracy. Let sports administrators stick to sport before we all become a laughing stock.