

Racism and Football in Great Britain

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Black players have emerged strongly in British football since the 1970s. As with other sports, football offers talented Black youngsters an avenue to social mobility. Today, an estimated 25-30% of professional football

players in Great Britain are Black and predominantly of African-Caribbean descent.

Surprisingly, their presence in British football is not a recent phenomenon. The first Black British professional football player was Arthur Wharton, who joined the

Rotherham United as a goalkeeper in 1889. Prior to joining this team, he played as a semi-professional with the Preston North End, a team who reach the Football Association Cup semi-finals in 1887. Despite his athletic ability, however, Wharton was not chosen to play for England. It was almost a century later, in 1978, that Viv Anderson of Nottingham Forest became the first Black player chosen for the national British team.

Sadly, the rise in the number of Black British football players was accompanied by hostility and taunts from the crowds of people who attended the games. Collective chanting, songs, and racist comments were common as were monkey grunts and gestures. Black players were showered with bananas and peanuts. The football fans not only directed this negative behavior towards opposing teams, but players from their own teams. In its overt form in the football stands and its institutionalized form within the football establishment, racism is still the ugly face of the “beautiful game” of football.

Far-right groups have been targeting football fans for their spontaneous displays of racism since, at least, the 1930s. However, it was not until the 1970s that these groups, such as the National Front (NF) and the British National Party (BNP), rose to prominence when football hooliganism, such as violence between fans and anti-social and drunken behavior, were identified as a growing problem. The far-right groups and the media exploited the traditional links between soccer and the working-class white men. For instance, the tabloid press, in particular, whipped up xenophobia and racism. Black people were regarded as aliens seeking to swamp the nation and threaten “the British way of

life”. The British governments also stirred up concerns about non-white immigration for decades and areas where football was played offered far-right groups a place to recruit supporters. These fascist and racist groups used the football games as a platform to gain free publicity when incidents were reported in the media.

In the 1970s, the NF encouraged hooligan groups to compete for the title of “the most racist ground in Britain”. In the 1980s, Chelsea in south London became the center of activity for racists and extremists. NF members handed out leaflets outside football grounds, notably Chelsea, Millwall, Arsenal and West Ham in London. At Leeds United and Newcastle United, members of NF and BNP distributed racist literature on game days. Copies of the NF magazine, *Bulldog*, were openly sold at many football clubs in the 1980s. The magazine, which was launched in 1977, encouraged fans to fight “for race and nation”.

Today, remarks about sexuality, physicality and race are common parts of the language on terraces and in changing rooms. Even among players, racist banter towards fellow team mates is accepted as part of team building. For example, in April 2004, Ron Atkinson, former coach and manager of the Manchester United and Aston Villa, was overheard after a game making a racist comment about a Black Chelsea player. Believing he was off the air, he called Marcel Desailly “a lazy f***ing n***er”. His comment was heard on some Middle East channels who broadcast live feeds after commercial British TV channels go off the air. Nevertheless, during his coaching career, particularly at West Bromwich, Atkinson nurtured several talented Black players including Cyrille

Regis, Brendan Batson and Laurie Cunningham.

The racial environment surrounding football, both on and off the pitch, i.e. areas where football is played, reflects the broader society. For example, the belief that different races display different athletic and intellectual abilities has proven hard to shift. Black players are assumed to have a biological advantage that makes them naturally gifted athletes. Yet, they are also assumed to be instinctive and undisciplined and have limited intellectual capacity. Such stereotypes have affected the positions they are allocated to play in football. Further, these beliefs prevent Black football players from being regarded as management material once their playing careers end. Sadly, it has only been since 1993 that Blacks have become managers of football league clubs. Currently, there are only three Black managers—Leroy Rosenior, Keith Alexander and Carlton Palmer—and only a handful of Black coaches in football. White football coaches, managers and senior officials recruit in their own image: white and middle-aged. The personal, informal basis by which recruit takes place makes it hard to monitor and challenge the bias nature of hiring practices in football.

During the 1980s, Great Britain appeared to have exported football hooliganism to continental Europe. This decade saw the spread of racist incidents by football fans. For instance, in 1984, drunken English football fans in Paris, including NF supporters, attacked local fans, vandalized property and taunted the French with racist and nationalistic insults. Far-right groups who supported the English national football team saw it as an opportunity to express nationalism and xenophobia. Nazi salutes and symbols were common when

England played in other countries. Despite promises by the government and football authorities to investigate links between racist organizations and football supporters little was done. In fact, in 1984, racist literature was distributed at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels before the European Cup Final. There were allegations that NF sympathizers had incited the spectator violence which culminated in 39, mainly Italian fans, getting crushed to death in a stampede.

Home-grown, football-related violence is evident in many European countries. Abuse of Black and ethnic minority players is common especially in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Germany, Italy and France. Neo-Nazi and neo-Fascist groups also target football grounds. Germany has a bad reputation for racist abuse and far-right influence among its fans. In Italy, at the Lazio grounds in Rome, football fans boo and make monkey noises at Black players on opposing teams. In December 2004, Lazio striker Paolo Di Canio made the fascist salute on two occasions during football games. He was banned from one game and fined 10,000 euros, a paltry sum for a top football player.

In general, football players do not allow the racist abuse to interfere with their game, on the other hand, they sometimes react directly to fans who display racism. For example, Dixie Dean, an Everton centre-forward, recalled hearing racist comments as he left the pitch at half-time during a match in London in the 1930s. He responded by punching the offender. Also, in the 1980s, John Barnes, who played for Liverpool, once back-heeled a banana off the pitch. Further, in 1995, Eric Cantona, a popular, white French



football player for the Manchester United, attacked a Crystal Palace fan that shouted abuse and spat at him. Cantona received a two-week sentence which was later reduced to 120 hours of community service. This incident focused media attention on the pressures experienced by players who are subjected to racism and xenophobia during football games.

During the 1980s, English officialdom became concerned about the extent of racism and hooliganism in football. This concern arose because of the violent confrontations between football supporters at home and abroad during which people lost their lives. In February 1984, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the Football Supporters Association (FSA), and the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) all launched initiatives in an attempt to end racism at football grounds and to encourage ethnic minorities to attend games. The escalation of **right-wing** extremists in football and other areas of life, in the 1970s, led groups, such as the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), to create links with football fans. ANL members challenged the sale of racist literature in and around football grounds. However, these initiatives received little support from foot-

ball clubs and some even banned the ANL from their grounds.

The 1991 Football (Offences) Act made racist chanting at games unlawful but the fact that it only applied to communal chanting meant that individuals shouting racist abuse mostly escaped conviction. In 1993, the CRE and PFA launched the 'Let's Kick Racism Out of Football' campaign. These groups wanted to encourage football clubs and sup-

porters to launch their own campaigns to combat racism. Some key points listed in their action plan included: (a) stating that the club would not tolerate racism, (b) taking action against supporters who engage in racist abuse, chanting or intimidation, (c) taking disciplinary action against players who made racially abusive remarks before, during and after games, (d) preventing the sale of racist literature at the grounds, and (e) adopting an equal opportunity policy regarding employment and the provision of services. The campaign had the support of all but one of the professional club. A magazine called *Kick It!* was produced with funding from the Football Trust to aid this campaign. Fanzines, a magazine for football fans of a particular team, was produced in the mid-1980s. Now, almost every football club has at least one. These fanzines are almost all anti-racist and, in some cases, are produced by anti-racist groups.

During 1995 through 1996, the 'Let's Kick Racism Out of Football' campaign evolved into the Advisory Group Against Racism and Intimidation (AGARI) and, in 1997, it became the 'Kick It Out' campaign. Although it is an independent campaign, it receives funding from the CRE and the

football organizations. In 1997, the PFA, CRE, Football Association, and the European Community promoted an anti-racist video, 'Show Racism the Red Card',¹ featuring top football players. The video was shown throughout the country and in Europe. Additionally, some football clubs offer coaching positions to minorities and have taken measures to eliminate racism on the ground.

As in Britain, some other European countries have initiated campaigns to combat racism in football. For example, players in the Netherlands went on strike to protest against racism. Also, referees there are permitted to stop a game if there is excess noise or abuse from fans. Additionally, in 1999, on the initiative of supporter groups from different parts of Europe, a network called Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) was set up to challenge racist behavior in stadiums and clubs. In 2002, FARE assisted the European governing body for football, UEFA, with a plan of action to assist national associations, clubs and leagues in preventing and combating racism in football. UEFA set up the 'Fair Play Scheme' and introduced fines and stadium bans for racist behavior, though these are probably not real deterrents. FIFA, the international governing body for football, held an anti-racism conference in Buenos Aires in 2001.

While these activities are bringing about small but important changes to the culture of football, progress is slow. Cases of racial abuse often have to be dropped due to lack of evidence. Players who respond angrily to abuse from other team members risk being told they do not have a sense of humor and they may experience isolation. It is hard to prove that racial motivation was behind any decision not to

hire a Black candidate for a management position. For example, Paul Davis, a former Arsenal player with seven years' experience as a coach, was passed over for a more senior position that was awarded to a less-experienced white candidate. When Davis questioned the decision, he was told that he did not have the right "personality" for the job. Fear of reprisal and future bad relationships with their club often discourage Black players and coaches from complaining about racist incidents or taking a club to court.

Many people may claim that, since the 1990s, the problem of racism in football has largely been solved in Britain. The media now highlights racist incidents in other European countries that involve football players and fans. One of the reasons for this exposure is that, thanks to some of the measures taken, the abuse of footballers at stadiums in Great Britain is less widespread than in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, as John Barnes, who was pelted with bananas and abused by NF supporters during his playing years, noted: "When you talk about kicking racism out of football, people automatically assume you are talking about on the terraces and on the football field. But all the racists have to do is keep their mouth shut for 90 minutes and they're fine."²

There has been a visible increase in the number of Black football players. The 2002 England World Cup Team included four or five Black players and the coach of the England Women's team is a Black woman, Hope Powell. Black football stars are role models for Black youths. The multi-racial football teams represent Great Britain's multi-racial society where talent is the determiner of who plays on the national team. Yet, in contrast to the rise of

Black players, there are still very few British-Asian professional football players despite the game's popularity among young Asians.³ This reflects the stereotypes about their physical unsuitability and their alleged lack of interest in football. For those who do play, racist abuse has forced them to form segregated leagues.

Another disturbing issue is the low attendance of ethnic minorities at football games. The low attendance indicates that football clubs still need to convince minorities that they will not encounter racism at football grounds. Further, it is estimated that less than 1% of active football fans are Black British or Asian British. This is well below the national percentage of ethnic minorities in the general population. Even in areas with large ethnic minority populations, attendance at matches is low. Football clubs that actively involve local ethnic minority communities as players and spectators tend to exhibit the least amount of racism. When West Bromwich Albion, a well-known football club in Britain, pioneered the signing of Black football players in the late 1970s, this action attracted local Black support. Changes to football grounds are also seen as important in encouraging more Blacks and Asians to attend football games. Traditionally, most spectators were in the stands, which as the word implies, meant they had to stand throughout the games. After incidents where spectators were crushed by other fans during stampedes, all-seater grounds became more common. Yet, despite these changes, the number of ethnic minority spectators still remains low.

Campaigns among football fans have undoubtedly been successful in creating a better environment at some football clubs. However, inflammatory statements by

politicians on the issue of non-white immigration and the aftermath of 9/11 are going a long way to undermine initiatives aimed at improving race relations in Great Britain in the new millennium. Also, it is clear that, thus far, there has been no serious attempt to tackle institutionalized racism within football clubs. In football, as in the broader society, it seems that racism is not about to disappear.

NOTES

- 1- The read card is that the referee shows a player who is being sent off the pitch
- 2- See The Observer, November 21, 2004
- 3- In Britain, the term 'Asian' refers to those originating in the Indian subcontinent.