

The revolution in English football

By Jane Ashworth

ON 8 June the European Football Championships begin at Wembley, the first international football spectacular to be held in England since the 1966 World Cup. In 30 years the game has changed: the terraces have been replaced by all-seater stands; supporters wear replica strips rather than scarf or bobble hat; live television coverage shows the foreign stars who ply their trade in the English League. The money-men and an elite of ex-player managers and coaches are in an alliance to modernise the game on the field of play and in its management structures. Off the pitch the most visible changes in the game, like the more comfortable grounds, the greater variety of merchandise, and more soccer on TV, express a conscious drive from the big clubs to sell their product to a more middle-class, or at least more affluent, audience.

There is great resentment among people who feel exploited by the clubs or who have been priced out of the game. Some club fanzines protest. But there is no reason to expect that gates and sales will drop off and so no reason to expect the clubs to lower their prices.

Like much else in the leisure industry, football is a developing market, offering substantial profits for the owners or shareholders of the biggest clubs. But football has not always been attractive to the money-men: making the industry profitable has been a battle in which interweaving processes and conflicts are still unfolding, actively reshaping the game — on the pitch, in the club shops and in the boardroom.

In the last half-decade these changes have rattled along apace. The future of soccer is still being fought over but the outline of the resolution to the current round of conflicts is probably visible.

The most exciting change has been on the pitch. For the lover of the 'beautiful game', the naked drive for profit rankles, but it surely has improved the quality of the spectacle.

Only three years ago it would have been unimaginable that so many players of the calibre of Ginola, Kinkladze, Bergkamp, Vialli and the great Ruud Gullit would play for English clubs. For the football lover even the names are a pleasure to conjure with, evoking memories of great feasts of international soccer where the British teams were donkeys against the tricksters who had skills seldom seen on home turf. These imports have helped clubs switch the presentation of soccer from a gritty, artless and masochistic game to one which oozes Euro-chic. Of course foreign stars have



* Jane Ashworth ran a women's football team in north-east England and is writing a book about the experience.

enhanced the English game for many years, but not in the current numbers. The most influential import, Cantona, came before this trend began because he needed to leave France. But he is alone in this the latest crop of talent: the rest are not refugees from archaic, stubborn regimes which prefer obedience to creative flair. They are here by choice. It is a sign of the changing times that Cantona has found a home in English soccer. However, it is less surprising that Sheffield Wednesday and Leeds could not cope with him and that it was only at his third club — Manchester United — where he found a management far-sighted and flexible enough to set him free and make him captain in an FA Cup Final. Up to then Cantona had never captained a side: even his teachers thought him too risky to be the school skipper.

But bringing English football up to date involves more than importing top-class players. There have been changes which go right down to the roots of the game, and a challenge to the footballing orthodoxy. In short, a change of direction by the FA.

The motor of change has been the pursuit of profit, marshalled in by a new breed of Chairman at the big clubs. Many extremely rich, and well-rooted in the business world of their region — often with businesses of their own which benefit from supplying or servicing the football club.

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The money-men need managers like Keegan, Hoddle, Gullit and Gerry Francis to make the clubs competitive and qualify for the big money circuits in Europe. Conversely, these enlightened managers and coaches are attracted to the new breed of owners, who, unlike their predecessors, promise not to sell on the best players to balance the books. They recognise the potential profits to

be made from the club, and so invest in the game. Their money and business know-how is needed by the ex-players to develop the stadia, market the merchandise, and pay to recruit attractive players.

The best club teams in Europe, and probably the best national teams too, play to a different style and pattern. In the run up to Euro '96 the England team has changed style, and the appointment of Hoddle to succeed Venables after the summer is an important moment of consolidation in the transformation of English soccer according to European models — a process first officially marked by the appointment of Terry Venables to the top job.

English football tactics had been ruled by the FA, which produced a series of 'scientifically proved' coaching videos and manuals. English Direct Play was better than Brazilian and continental European style soccer. The Direct Play theory of the game underpins the classically British execution of the 4-4-2 formation which requires players to move, pass and think in straight lines, as opposed to the oblique lines which continental players play to and look out for. It plays down the need for personal skills, and governs the way children are taught the game.

The story, which may be apocryphal, is that Hoddle's first act in charge at Stamford Bridge was to put a stop to any Chelsea side playing 4-4-2.

Hoddle has at last been recognised as one of the best football brains of his generation, though he only played 53 times for England. The old guard were too narrow-minded or factionally blind to build a team around a player with such flair and vision. Instead they chose to build the side around a different sort of world-class player, the gritty, determined and oh-so-English, Bryan Robson.

There is always the possibility that the old 4-4-2ers will stage some rearguard action, but it appears their back has been broken. The next key appointment within the FA is the Technical Director — who will be in charge of re-writing the coaching manuals and re-organising the coaching systems.

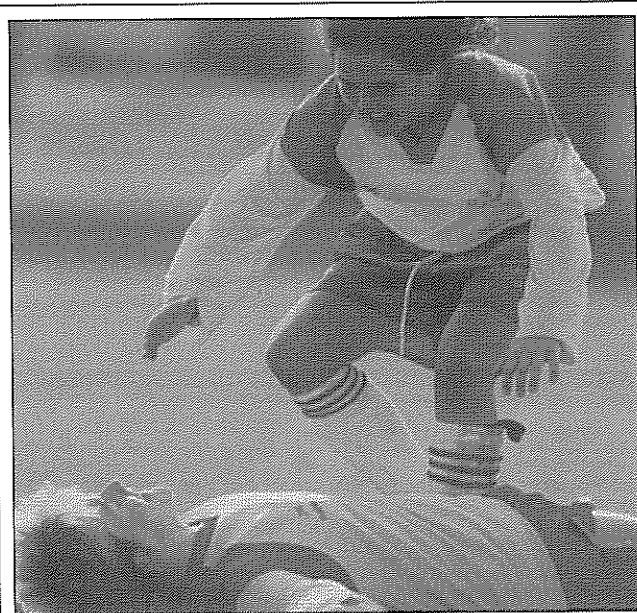
With the money-men behind them the ex-players seem to have a real chance of dragging English football into the 1990s, finally doing away with the dominance of football's equivalent of the 'old farts' in the rugby hierarchy whom Will Carling so famously offended.

The Brits have wised up to what the Europeans have known for a decade or more — all players should be able to control the ball, and keeping possession is the most certain way to prevent the opposition scoring. The debate is not over the most efficient way to play — whether 4-4-2 is better than a sweeper or a Christmas tree formation — but whether thinking in terms of a system is in and of itself a restricting framework of thought. It is hard to imagine the old guard of the FA getting its collective head around a postmodernist deconstruction of the game — but as the ex-players get their hands (and heads) on the institutions which reproduce players, they will try to copy the Ajax model and set about developing youngsters who are not ruined by too early an introduction to the 11-a-side game, nor by the coaches who rant, rave and demand muscular victory rather than displays of skills in boys who have barely reached puberty.

It is unlikely that the process has gone far enough in time to rescue the fortunes of the England team for these European Championships — but, as the dressing room revolt in the 1990 World Cup showed, many players themselves do know better than the style in which they have been forced to play suggests.

Ex-players like Lineker, Hoddle and Keegan know that this production line of young players has to change if they are to be part of a relaunched English soccer which holds its own on the European stage.

In the '70s and '80s the game was in crisis. The response to vio-



The women's game

WOMEN'S football and women's rugby are the fastest growing sports in the UK. Most of the FA Premier League clubs have a women's team as part of their football in the community programme.

At the top of the women's game is the FA Women's Premiership which divides into a Premier League and two first divisions — north and south. Underneath the Premiership are regional leagues which may have three or four divisions. There are also junior leagues.

The FA took over the Women's Football Association following a FIFA directive in 1992. In the absence of a league sponsor, with the Football Trust the FA are able to subsidise clubs in the Premiership. Sky Lifestyle channel sponsors the Women's FA Cup.

In England the women's game is unpaid but in Italy and Scandinavia it is professional and semi-professional. America won the World Cup on the strength of their collegiate game.



Chelsea lose their gaffer. England gain hope.

lence and unpleasant or dangerous stadia was a turning point in the history of football. Both problems were bad for business, and were eroding the base of support for the game. After the disasters at Hillsborough, Bradford and Heysel, football had to bring itself up to standard. The grounds were manifestly old, unsafe and in need of refurbishment.

Sociologist Ian Taylor argues that the dilapidation of the grounds and the absence of government will to impose high standards before the disasters made it imperative were part of the decline in the quality of public life in Britain. Private enterprise was not geared up to provide safety and comfort. But the safety crisis was taking its toll. The gate for a top division club dropped from an average of 27,000 in 1978 to 18,000 in 1983. Bad press, reduced gate receipts, and high costs of policing demanded action from the club owners and football authorities.

Most clubs were very heavily in debt by this time and had to redevelop their business to establish a financial even keel. Cleaning up the game led to the clubs beginning a process which changed the

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nature of the football supporter. They chose not to find the money through the Stock Market or banks but to make the fans pay — and so was born the drive to attract the 'new fan.'

No longer were the clubs satisfied with being the primary leisure pursuit of working-class men alone. The clubs wanted to attract a more affluent audience, of either gender, who could afford to buy more merchandise, pay higher admission prices and not start fights. Government also funded some of the capital works — with £200m via The Football Trust — which encouraged the return of the spectator and appealed to a more middle-class supporter.

The refurbishments were used by the clubs to justify increased admission prices. Sections of the working class — especially young people — were priced out. Although the crowds dropped in the early '80s, the income from gate receipts and season tickets rocketed up from a season's average for each top flight club from £291,000 in 1978 to £464,000 in 1985/6. The price rises have continued. In 1994 the average had increased to £1,515,000, with the big six clubs taking at least £5,379,000. The *Manchester Evening News* calculates that Old Trafford will take a million pounds per match now the stadium holds 55,000.

It is open to debate whether these changes ended hooliganism. It was on a downward trend even before the stadia were changed. Many fans who had run with the pack stopped doing so after the Heysel disaster in 1985, where 39 people died. Many report that the deaths pulled them up sharpish. The clubs were employing their own stewards, who did not wind up the fans as the police had done. Another factor which reduced hooliganism was increasingly sophisticated police surveillance, which almost guaranteed trouble-makers would be identified. In any case, football has become a fairly safe sport to watch: the number of arrests at matches almost halved in the ten years between 1984 and '94.

These refurbished stadia may not be appreciated by those who once stood on the terrace, but they are safer.

The 'new fans' whom the big clubs have been chasing have different attitudes and spending patterns from the old type. They are more likely to be season ticket holders. Since 1995 income from season tickets has exceeded income from gate receipts. The new

fans can not be relied upon to support their team through thick and thin. They are consumers in the leisure industry — not fans.

The drive for the new target audience has had beneficial effects: it has required clubs to change their approach to attracting and servicing their fans. Past practice of only catering for white males has been superseded. There are now more women watching games and some grounds have crèches. Also, more Asian men have started going to matches. The number of

spectators who earn more than £30,000 a year has increased.

It has not just been inside the stadia where English football has lagged behind. The big European clubs were quicker than the English to realise the potential of satellite TV — as when Silvio Berlusconi bought AC Milan and rapidly assimilated the club into his media empire — and this media power is completing the modernisation drive. The BBC and ITV had paid a relative pittance for broadcasting rights for the old first division, far less than the European clubs charge their TV networks. The Chief Executives of the big clubs, lead by David Dein of Arsenal and Alan Sugar of Spurs, revolted. Buying in the marketing and political expertise of Saatchi and Saatchi, the big clubs took their clubs out of the Football League and over to the FA to launch the Premiership.

The pseudo-democracy of the League and FA — where all clubs were voting members, giving a small club similar rights to a big club — was replaced, as the powerful clubs took control of their own destiny. They organised as a separate league under the FA's umbrella but in control of their own affairs, without reference to the interests of the smaller clubs. The axis of power shifted from football as a whole to those clubs which already had the money to do well.

To ease the breakaway there were smoke screens wafted — particularly the promise of reducing the number of matches to rest the players and so improve the chances of the national team. But that has barely happened. Whatever the false promises and ideological side-shows, the move was about the big clubs taking

Football focus

● In 1985 the average admission price to a top-flight game was £3.70, and £2 for a bottom division club. In 1994 admission to a Premier League club was £9.50, and £3.50 for a third division side. Manchester United's prices rose most dramatically from £3.50 in 1985 to £14 in 1993. Prices now can be in excess of £20.

● The FA Premier League Fan Survey shows that the income bracket most likely to approve of the stadia changes, and therefore most likely to watch more games, is £30,000 plus. All income brackets approve of the changes, but, as income decreases, so too does the likelihood of watching more matches since the changes. All income brackets say they watch more games since the stadia changes.

● Arrests at matches have gone down from a height of 7,000 in 1984 to just over 4,200 in 1994.

control of their own destiny, developing their own market and consolidating the changing role of supporters — from fans to consumers.

The FA was aware of how far the English game was financially slipping behind the rest of Europe, so were keen to go along with the changes. They were already discussing how to attract a better off, more middle-class audience for soccer — not just to sustain high ticket prices, replace volatile fans with the more sedate, and increase revenues from merchandising, but also for the TV negotiations. The more confidence advertisers have in Sky viewers buying their products, the more they will pay Sky and the more Sky will be willing to pay for broadcasting rights.

Within a couple of seasons of the launch of the Premiership, Sky TV and the BBC had together agreed to pay £304 million over five years for the right to broadcast games. Previously the BBC and ITV had paid about £80m. And during this time the value of the big clubs rocketed — most dramatically and observably Manchester United. United are probably the world's biggest sporting club — a long way from the best, and measured on the strength of the 1995/6 squad, which was good enough to become the first club

to twice win the English double, possibly not even in Europe's top five. But the history of the club, its heroes — particularly the fallen heroes — and the large Mancunian diaspora, give United a brand recognition which exceeds probably every other club in the world.

In 1991 United was floated on the Stock Market, capitalised at £31m. Today the club is valued at £301m. The share price has risen from 52p to 335p. United can now afford the world-class players they need if they are to replicate their domestic success in European competition.

Now that the biggest clubs have upgraded their grounds, secured sell-outs for most matches, and are getting the hang of keeping and producing good players, they are planning to revisit the matter of broadcasting rights. Only four years on from the formation of the Premiership, the deal with Sky is now a hindrance to the ambitions of the big clubs. Within months rather than years the big clubs will attempt to launch club-specific TV channels: Manchester United, Arsenal, Newcastle, Liverpool, Spurs and maybe Leeds and Chelsea.

Just how quickly this next stage takes shape might hang on the decision of the Office of Fair Trading, which is currently reviewing the legality of the FA's Premiership. The BBC argue that the Premiership is an illegal cartel, restricting the free-market sale of broadcasting rights. The outcome of this review will affect the speed of change in English football. Before the club channels are set up, the clubs have first to regain the broadcasting rights of their matches back from the collective control of the League. The day the OFT review was announced share prices in Manchester United and Spurs leapt up.

If the Premiership is indeed deemed a cartel, and therefore clubs are prevented from collective negotiations, then this will be the go-ahead for the launch of club channels which will increase the division between rich and poor even within the Premier League. At the moment each club is guaranteed so many visits by Sky. While the most frequently broadcast does receive the most income, the deal spreads the riches across the Premier League and beyond into football as a whole. The smaller Premiership clubs will not take such a move lying down. They will fight to retain corporate negotiation, and they have a fairly strong hand: the big clubs need domestic competition, at least for the next few years as the pan-European leagues are established.

There are also technological problems — not every home has Sky or cable, and Sky's satellites are already on overload. But here Labour might bail them out. The deal Blair struck with BT, and which Tebbit blessed, will enhance the viability of the club-specific channels. BT has the technology in place to pump audio-visual data into every house with a phone connection in most areas of the UK. Currently BT are restrained from launching this service by the terms of privatisation, which gave their cable-company competitors ten years before BT could enter that market. Blair has promised to rescind that constraint and free BT to distribute television to a much wider audience than Sky and cable can reach.

The big clubs' plans to launch their own TV channels explains their diversification into other sports which do not attract a large crowd and therefore do not seem to be immediate money mak-

Art, beauty, philosophy and football

By Richard Love

"When you are taught beauty at an early age, it is very difficult to give it up. A good footballer is by nature a beautiful footballer."

"I imagine the ball to be alive, sensitive and responding to the touch of my foot, to my caresses, just like a woman with the man she loves."

Eric Cantona

ERIC Cantona is probably the most entertaining and talented player in English football. As well as his obvious passion for the game he attempts to come across as an intellectual — if the coffee-table book *La Philosophie de Cantona* is anything to go by he is, at best, a light-weight intellectual.

The book is thoroughly entertaining. Unfortunately most of the entertainment is in its weakness. It's the kind of stuff you would expect to find in *Adrian Mole*, not in the work of a grown-up. The book is made up of short quotes, most of which are on the level of "I wish I never had to grow up."

However, amongst this kind of stuff you will find an insight into what makes this very talented player tick. He is dedicated to the idea that football should be beautiful to watch and that players should treat their sport not just as athletic activity but also as art.

On the pitch you can see what he means in practice. Not only is he a game winner, but he does it with such style and artistry it is a pleasure to watch — even for those who normally find football dull.



Clubs with Tory connections

- **Blackburn Rovers:** Honorary President — Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven
- **Everton:** Director — Sir Philip Carter, Chair of Liverpool Conservative Association since 1985
- **Arsenal:** The Chair, Peter Hill-Wood, is also Director of Hambros Bank which gives £100,000 a year to the Tory Party.
- **Manchester City:** Director Andrew Thomas is Chair of Greenall Brewers, which has given £15,000 to the Tories since 1993.
- **Newcastle United:** Newcastle is a wholly owned subsidiary of Cameron Developments, which has given £100,000 to the Tories since 1989.



Blair meets Keegan: let's hope it doesn't rub off

ers. The technology which makes them possible also partly explains the new arenas — usually built with at least support from the locally active cable company, which has them wired for sound and vision. For a decade or more the big clubs have dabbled in promoting other sports. Now this is becoming an imperative. Newcastle United under the direction of Sir John Hall — recently made a Director of the Bank of England, just like Manchester United's Chair, Sir Roland Smith — is launching the Newcastle Sporting Club. The intention is to bring together a number of teams under the Newcastle United label — ice-hockey, basketball and rugby — and so make money from those consumers who do not like football, but who will respond to other sports. Hall wanted to build an arena next to the football ground to host the indoor sports, stage music events and produce copy for the United TV station. He ran into planning difficulties and was beaten to building an arena by Chas Chandler, the ex-Animal. The

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battle continues.

Hall wants to develop the ground and arena into a complex with shops and restaurants, and to enhance the existing museum, making the stadium a place of importance in its own right, not just somewhere to watch football.

Other clubs have the same idea. Manchester United are looking at building a theme park. Chelsea, who have been floated on the Stock Market in the last month, have plans to build a hotel as part of the Stamford Bridge complex.

For the money-men, however, there remains an apparently irreducible problem: football is a game, and there are losers.

In the current structures, losing the English League title — maybe on goal difference — denies access to the really big money in the European Super-league. And that is a loss of income which cannot be economically insured against. The answer to that dilemma is now being fought over on the European stage.

The big European clubs want to secure themselves regular European games and the enormous amounts of money they bring in from enhanced broadcasting fees — big European games are screened world-wide — and the widened market for merchandise. They want European competition with guaranteed access for their clubs — regardless of their domestic successes or failures. But football is a game with a tradition of on-pitch success opening doors to higher flights of the game. It simply goes against the grain — it does not seem right for there to be automatic entry into Europe for the financially big clubs who may have had a poor domestic season.

If the big clubs get their way then the irony is complete: the structures of the game would be changed to protect the investment of the big clubs. The game would lose its bite — there would be less hanging on each match. It would be rather decadent. No doubt there would be some routes for emerging clubs to join the top flight providing they can meet entry criteria — like a large enough stadium — and this will go some way towards placating opposition.

But inclusion is not the problem for the big club. Relegation is the issue.

The money of the TV companies has already started to shape the structure of the European competition. In 1987 Napoli sold the right to broadcast their European games, but they were knocked out in the first round. RAI, the state Italian TV company, was not impressed, having paid £2m for two games. Subsequently the European competitions were seeded to make sure the big clubs were — freak results aside — ensured a safe passage

through to the later stages of the tournaments.

There are still many battles to be fought, and how far football can globalise itself on the back of improved media technology is not certain. World leagues are talked about in the *Financial Times* and by Berlusconi. But there may be a limit: it may be that the business requires fans to be able to actually go to matches to maintain interest.

For sure, as the game grows in money and influence, it will become once again the subject of government concern. Preparing for government, the Labour Party has produced a Charter for Football. Labour promises to streamline planning procedures to help clubs to build out-of-town stadia, to further control bad behaviour at grounds, and to encourage football in schools. The concessions to football supporters are a promise that they will have a representative on the ground licensing body, and exhortations to clubs to listen to the fans and not to exclude 'sectors of the community' by inequitable pricing. The Charter does not investigate the accountability of the boards to fans, participation by fans in decision making, or even the less tricky question of supporting the fans to develop the community programmes of the clubs.

In short, the Charter does not challenge the direction of the big clubs, which see the fans as little more than loyal consumers. It does not recognise that the fans see themselves as members of some type of association to which they are committed.

Out of this conflict — supporters as fans or consumers — will come change: supporters will be galvanised to fight for a greater say, or else the money-men's bottom line will increasingly dominate. ■

Who owns the clubs?

MANCHESTER United and Spurs are listed on the Stock Market in their own right. Chelsea is listed through Chelsea Village, the company which owns the football club.

At most other clubs the Directors own the title-deeds.

The richest backers of professional clubs

Jack Walker	Blackburn	360m
David Thompson	QPR	350m
Alan Sugar	Spurs	80m
Owen Oyston	Blackpool	50m
Leslie Silver	Leeds	40m
John Madejski	Reading	23m
David Dein	Arsenal	23m
Sir Jack Hayward	Wolves	20m

Source: *The Independent* May 1993 quoted in William's *English Football Stadia After Hillsborough*.