FOOTBALL FANDOM IN ENGLAND: 
OLD TRADITIONS AND NEW TENDENCIES

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Abstract

In the past two decades, globalization has brought about major changes in the world of football, which is perhaps the most globalized area of not only sport, but of culture as well. The case of British football is a unique one, as the country can be regarded as a pioneer in the introduction of modern football, but also a prominent engine of the current globalizing process. The objective of the current article is to explore the attitudes and opinions of English football supporters, mainly focusing on the question how the general patterns of fandom, match-going and supporting have changed as a result of the transformation of English football after the Taylor Report. In order to have a better, more in-depth understanding, a qualitative approach was taken, and the authors carried out semi-structured, in-depth interviews with football supporters (N=9) living in Plymouth, Devon. The results show that the way traditional, middle-class supporters follow their favourite club is changing, even though the actual at-match habits show remarkable similarities, which reflects a strong football culture in England. The fans interviewed seem to be slightly put off by the high cost of going to matches, and the general disappointment about the change in the atmosphere since the emergence of all-seater stadia also takes its toll. Although the participants, being members of the middle class, are often referred to as the new target audience of the clubs, it is becoming more and more difficult for them to finance their supporting, which may result in a decrease of their enthusiasm. If these tendencies prevail, football grounds will soon be populated with mostly businessmen and the traditional grass-root fans might have to spend a considerable percentage of their salary in order to stay in the game.

Key words: football fans, English football, globalization, Taylor Report, supporter identity

Introduction

In the past decades, the development of information and communication technology has brought about major changes on all fields of life. Globalization does not only have effects on the economic system, but on culture, and within this, on sport as well. However, there are not many specific cultural phenomena that are global in a sense that they appear in every corner of our planet. Football is one of these rare examples, a game that is played and watched by crowds on each of the five continents. It is a fact that FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) has 208 member states, compared to the United Nations, which has 192. In the past two decades, the nature of the game changed immensely, most probably, owing to the process of globalization. According to Beck (2000), the process brings about the intensification of transnational spaces, events, problems, conflicts and biographies, which seems a relevant statement for football as well, underlined by facts such as the worldwide coverage of international and even national league matches, the prestige of the European Champions League, and the intensive geographical mobility of players and coaches. The phenomenon created a new context in fandom, where the local and national bonds of supporters seem to be replaced, or at least complemented by a more rational consumer attitude, which takes less account of localities and nationalities (Giulianotti, 1999; Williams, 2000).
The experiences of globalization can be diverse in the different parts of the world (Bauman, 1998), and this may certainly be accepted for the field of football, where the economic potential of countries, clubs and even fans has a strong impact on their position in the football society. The case of Britain is a unique one, as the country can be regarded as a pioneer regarding the introduction of football, and a prominent engine of the current globalizing process as well. Since its emergence in the late 1800s football in England has had an undeniable effect on the society, the people and their lives. Nowhere else are the fans so involved, there is no other country in the world, where there are so many people who claim to support a team or whose lives are governed by their team’s fixture list.

The objective of this article is to explore the attitudes and opinions of English football supporters, mainly focusing on the question how the general patterns of fandom, match-going and supporting have changed as a result of the transformation of English football from a relatively isolated, yet very traditional cultural phenomenon closely connected to the working class to a product demanded by millions of global consumers.

**Historical background**

Today’s situation can be understood from a historical point-of-view; accordingly, it is necessary to provide a brief description of two milestones in the recent development of the game that is the Taylor Report and the foundation of the Premier League.

The 1980s were a very dark time for supporters. Football hooliganism was in its heyday, the government was incapable of controlling the situation, which led to tragedies involving the deaths of hundreds. After the Hillsborough tragedy, Lord Justice Taylor was asked to chair an inquiry into the disaster and to make recommendations concerning crowd control and safety at sports grounds (Greenfield & Osborn, 1998). In August 1989, Taylor released his Interim Report, which contained forty-three separate recommendations which were designed to be immediately implemented by all Football League clubs. The principal recommendations of the Interim Report were the following:

- A review of the terrace capacities in all grounds, with an immediate 15% reduction in ground capacities
- Restrictions on the capacities of self-contained supporter pens
- The opening of perimeter fence gates
- A review of the Safety Certificates held by all Football League grounds
- Constant monitoring of crowd density by the police and Stewards

The Final Report was published in January, 1990. Taylor was primarily concerned with the poor condition of football grounds, where supporters were contained in prison-like circumstances, the unprofessional conduct of the police, the football authorities, the behaviour of players, the way alcohol was sold at football grounds and the media for sensationalizing the events. The most important provision was the enforcement of all-seater stadia, to which grounds had to be converted by 1994 in the first two divisions and by 2000 in the third and fourth division. This placed an unprecedented financial burden on all Football League clubs (Carnibella et al., 1996), which resulted in the growth of admission fees as well.

At the beginning of the 1990s, football underwent the process of ‘sterilization’. Its symbols were the technologized all-seater stadia, a concrete theatre where fans do not stand but sit. The new facilities met the demands of businessmen and simple consumers alike, with bars, restaurants, club shops, museums and other businesses. Spectator safety was guaranteed; in order to ensure safety, CCTV is used for surveillance and spectators are identifiable by the number of their seats (Bale, 2000), thus, the stadium changed to what Foucault (1979) described as ‘a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism’. This modernised stadium required high admission fees but on the other hand, it invited growing attendances.

As more and more people went to football matches the income of the clubs started to rise dramatically. This, however, was only true for the traditional ‘Big Clubs’ i.e. those clubs that
have been in the First Division for years and competed for European honours. Parallel to the
crowds growing in number at football matches, those who wanted to watch from home also
grew in numbers. In the years before the Premier League was formed TV contracts were
handled by the Football League and the money received was distributed between all the
clubs in the Football League. The top clubs wanted to change this as they felt that their
‘product’ was superior to those of the clubs in lower leagues. This coincided with the
emergence of satellite and cable television, so the scene was set for the most important deal
to be made in the recent history of English football.

On the 20th February 1992 the first division clubs resigned from the Football League en
masse and three month later the Premier League was established as a limited company. The
League decided to take the radical step of assigning television rights to Sky TV
(www.premierleague.com). At the time charging fans to watch televised sport was a relatively
new concept, but a combination of quality football on offer and Sky’s marketing strategy saw
the value of the Premier League soar. The initial deal was worth £191 million over five years.
To televise the matches from 2007-2010, Sky and Setanta have paid a staggering £1.7
billion (Official Site of the Premier League, 2008).

With the introduction of the Premiership in 1992, the top 22 (later 20) teams were able to
compete in a championship, which was built on a financial basis and soon became profitable.
The Premier League became an increasingly popular destination for well-known football
players all over the world. Due to the popularity and regular TV coverage of the Premiership,
attendances in the lower divisions remained at a low level (www.soccerstats.com), which
widened the gap between top clubs and the rest even further. As the amount of money
circulating in football industry rapidly grew after 1989, the third ‘football boom’ began. Yet,
this boom was different from the previous two (1880-1900s and the 1930s), for it involved
much less participation of the lowest social strata. As the reconstructions after the Taylor
Reports were completed, the clubs finally had a reason for raising ticket prices. And from
then on there was no stopping the business-centred approach. VIP and business boxes
started to crop up all over the country’s stadia and football clubs started to cater for the
higher class (Conn, 2004). With such an aggressive, profit-oriented approach revenue started to grow dramatically. Between 1992 and 2003 revenue growth for Premier League
clubs reached 650% (Michie & Oughton, 2005). The Sir Norman Chester Centre for the
Sociology of Sport carried out a survey in 2000 and it highlights the same tendencies; the
average total spent by fans in a season on football-related items reached £961 for the total
sample in 2000 (Williams, 2000).

The formation of the Premier League was accompanied by the recruitment of high-class
foreign players by English clubs, whose increasing revenues allowed them to afford to pay
higher wages to attract better players. This desire was fulfilled and resulted in a radical
change in policy; in the first 8 years of the Premier League’s existence the number of foreign
players in English football more than doubled and the number of foreign players increased

The above detailed events reformed English football to become what it is today. Gradually the tendencies mentioned trickled down to several lower league teams, resulting in
generally increased ticket and merchandise prices for clubs not only in the Premier League
but in the Football League as well. The Championship, being the second tier of English
football, is also becoming a league run by money, parachute payments for clubs getting
relegated from the Premier League have reached the £30 million mark.

Reactions by football supporters

In his report, Lord Justice Taylor admitted that the requirement of all-seater grounds was
opposed by fans’ organisations, as the fans were unhappy with reduced capacity, increased
prices, bond schemes, a decline in atmosphere and a greater regulation of their activities. On
the other hand, the clubs considered the provisions of the Report as an opportunity to
modernise football and football supporting, and perhaps, a chance to change the social
make-up of the attendance to provide a more attractive audience for advertisers, even though Taylor's intentions were different: “As to cost, clubs may well want to charge somewhat more for seats than for standing but it should be possible to plan a price structure which suits the cheapest seats to the pockets of those presently paying to stand” (Brown, 1998).

Owing to the high costs of stadium-transformations it was inevitable that admission fees would radically increase, and some of the supporters began to voice their concerns over this matter. In order to regain control over the game, fans began to form various supporter protest groups. By the middle of the decade, the number of independent organizations at club level reached forty, that of football fanzines was several hundred (Haynes, 1995), and there were two national supporters bodies as well; the Football Supporters Association (FSA) and the National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs (NFFSC). The FSA had some successful campaigns, for example, against the Thatcher government’s ID Cards scheme, racism, and the better treatment of English supporters abroad, but even more importantly, the formation of the FSA provided something of a model for football supporters to organise themselves in an effective manner (Williams, 2000) and in the 1990s, concerning the issue of stadium-conversion, it was the independent organisations at club level, which played the most active part.

Nevertheless, over the five years after the Taylor Report, prices increased by 350 per cent (Crabbe, 1996) and fans found it difficult to challenge the running of the game, because, as Rogan Taylor (1992) put it, the supporters are ‘neither straight “consumers” of a leisure product, nor ... legitimate participants in the game’.

“It is not just a club, it’s mine. It’s one of the most important things in my life ... and they know that, they can play on that loyalty and get away with anything because they know that you’re still going to turn up ... I don’t care whether my stand’s got a roof over it. I don’t care if I’ve got a nice comfy seat to sit on. I want to see the game.” (‘Shut Up and Sit Down’, Open Space, BBC2TV, March 1993, quoted in: Brown (1998, p. 54.)

After the soaring of admission fees, fans had to redefine their relationship with their clubs and begin protesting by forming organisations and releasing fanzines, in order to protect themselves against the economic power of the clubs. However, it is precisely football’s democratic appeal that makes it a fertile ground to commercialisation (Brown, 1998). The shift of power to the clubs is well demonstrated by American Malcolm Glazer’s acquisition of 6.1% of Manchester United’s shares in 2004, despite a boycott on club shops by Shareholders United, a supporters’ organisation of 52,000 members.

As a clear indicator of this power shift, it is worth taking a glance at a fan survey conducted by John Williams (2000) in the 1994/95 season. The question was: “How have things changed at your club over the past few years?” Of the twelve categories, five were clearly consumer-oriented, namely, (1) look of stadium, (2) spectator facilities, (3) attraction/family, (4) telephone booking, and (5) information. At Manchester United, the positive responses in the first three categories all ranked over 80% and in the latter two, they were around 60%. On the other hand, the two fields that can be connected with democritisation, (1) access/tickets and (2) response/views, the votes for improvement were between 41 and 42 per cent. On top of this, the proportion of those claiming that ticket prices had changed for the worse was over 65%, and it was 40% at Wimbledon F.C., the best-performing team in the category, which clearly indicates that the game has become more consumption-oriented and less democratic.

Methods

In order to have a better, more in-depth understanding of how English middle-class football fans perceive the changes at their favourite club, a qualitative approach was taken, and we decided to carry out semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method does not allow for generalizations, however, certain patterns of fandom could still be revealed, as the
participants were also asked to share the views of other fans in their social environment. Conducting interviews gave the opportunity and the freedom to investigate ‘uncharted territories’, whereas a set questionnaire would have channelled the responses.

Participants

The interviews were conducted with football supporters (n=9) living in one region, namely Plymouth, Devon, Between July and September, 2007. After a conscious selection process, we managed to find supporters of various clubs and more importantly, of various age groups and social and educational backgrounds and genders. Crawford mentions that most of the studies concentrate on “exceptional fans” therefore omitting from the analysis the fans who are not exceptionally fervent, however, still considered fans (Crawford, 2004). By choosing to look at supporters from this group we aim to bring a fresh approach to analysing football fans.

As far as their social background is concerned, two of them are members of the traditional working class, and all the others are affiliated with the broadly defined middle-class. As for the age groups the youngest interviewee is 17 years old and the oldest supporter interviewed is 64. The ages of the remaining seven are ranging between 22 and 58. There is only one woman among the nine people asked. Those who were born in Plymouth support their local team Plymouth Argyle with some of them having Premier League favourites as well. The person coming from London still supports his old team and he has remained a keen Chelsea fan and the woman from Wales supports Arsenal without any supporting attitude towards her home city club. The man coming from a rural area of Devon is the most loyal supporter of Plymouth Argyle and he has transformed his family into fans as well.

Results

General patterns of fandom

“If your work interferes with football give it up’ ran a pre-war Lancashire saying” (Russell, 1999, p. 15.) Although not so uncompromisingly, yet football is still a very important part of the lives’ of the participants of this study. From the answers given by the supporters concerned it has become clear that the fact that they support a football team and they see themselves as committed fans influences their everyday life, though in different ways and to varied degrees. Even if their daily routines are not determined and carried out according to the rhythm of the football calendar, they never ignore the episodes of diverse importance of their supported clubs. The supporters interviewed come from different social layers of the middle class ranging from the upper middle class, through the middle and lower middle class down to the working class and their everyday habits are influenced by their supporting behaviours in a versatile form. It is noteworthy to mention that their everyday life activities are affected by their football affinity differently not only because of their financial differences but also because their educational backgrounds have effects on their interests concerning the fields and aspects of football, consciousness and understanding regarding the tendencies and new phenomena in the realm of professional football.

Most of the fans interviewed had, at some point in their lives, been or still are regular match-goers. Their love for football however, has other effects on their everyday lives which are not directly connected to their attendance at football matches. As for the depth of their involvement in football, the respondents range from those who cannot even afford the TV package and therefore only watch games occasionally in pubs to those buying and collecting football scarves, shirts and other memorabilia. It is interesting to note that the two supporters attending football matches the most frequently spend the least money on other football-related items. We can state that it costs well over £1000 to be able to go to every home
game and an occasional away game of a club in the second tier of English football. This is a sum almost none of our interviewees can afford, similarly to most casual fans.

To calm their thirst for football, fans unable to attend games are engaged in various football-related activities. Depending on eagerness people spend different amounts of time with football in their free time. Most are involved in fantasy football leagues either only playing in them or even organising them. One interviewee (supporter of Plymouth Argyle and Liverpool FC, aged 51) frequently works as a referee for the local lower leagues and also organises an under-12s league single-handedly.

The time spent on football is obviously time spent away from one’s job and family and this can cause time management problems as well as serious conflicts if not dealt with properly. In one interesting case, “addiction” to football was listed as a major factor in the deterioration of an interviewee’s marriage. Those interviewees who do not attend matches regularly seem to be more open to missing even important football events not to upset other parts of their lives. On the other hand, those, who attend matches and feel a closer connection to their clubs proved to be reluctant to miss out on any football.

When talking about support, the decisive nature of the dwelling place and the family background are clear from the analysis. It is also evident that every single interviewee believes that ticket prices have some influence on their habits. As all the nine interviewees are from diverse, but mostly middle class backgrounds, it makes the analysis get narrowed down to the social strata where professional engagements, career promotions as well as studies are high on the priority lists. These four effects (locality, family, social background and the potential expenditures) can be identified as the main contributors to the patterns and the intensity of fandom.

\textit{Match-going}

The second set of questions was concerned with the participants’ match-going habits, with their involvement in singing and chanting, with their sitting or standing habits and with their participation in shouting and swearing. All the interviews were carried out in the year 2007 i.e. almost two decades after The Hillsborough Tragedy dating back to 1989 and this period of eighteen years between the recommendations of the Taylor Reports seems to be long enough to change the match-going and especially the ‘at-the-match’ habits of fans.

All of the older interviewees ranging from age 51 to age 63 remember their match-going habits and the atmosphere of the stadiums in their early years with nostalgia and in a day-dreaming manner. None of the interviewees put a question mark to the necessary character of this transformation measure but they appear to share the opinion that the higher ground safety perfectly accomplished in the all-seater stadia has resulted in a less lively atmosphere and less exciting effect. All the supporters can sit in comfortable seats in the newly refurbished all-seaters and according to the above mentioned interviews, this feeling of comfort reduces their singing and chanting, as well.

As far as the match-going habits are concerned, we can observe the tendency of going to matches less frequently and opting mostly for the home matches. Those who support their local team are still season-ticket holders and they try to go to the home games especially when they are at weekends. Because of their family commitments and job duties, they rarely attend Tuesday matches, though three of them do so as often as possible.

The rest of the interviewees who are interested in Plymouth Argyle but who do not regard themselves fans of the local team hardly ever go to matches. All of them have their own clubs and they only have moderate enthusiasm about the local team and thus they go to matches mostly as social events i.e. accompanying friends or family members, or at great occasions like a promotion party.

The question of going to away matches is a complex issue as it is difficult to finance the away matches not only because of the rising ticket prices but also the additional costs of travelling, eating out, having a pub evening with travelling fellow supporters. This can be the
reason why even loyal and keen fans can seldom afford to have a weekend day with the team following them to away matches.

The two supporters who still cheer on their earlier chosen London teams reflected that they have the desire to go to matches but neither of them can afford to travel to London and to buy tickets for any Arsenal or Chelsea matches. They would love to do so but those Premier League match tickets especially for the top teams are not affordable for them.

The most comprehensive conclusion in connection with their singing and chanting is that all of them with one exception are enthusiastic singers and chanters. They are all happy to join into any chanting going on at the matches. As for shouting and swearing the supporters involved in this study find it acceptable and most of them admit that at times they themselves shout and swear but they do not indulge in swearing a lot. The very last question in this part of the questionnaire was about the match-going or match-related rituals the supporters follow. The most frequently mentioned ritual is the pub crawl when friends go to pubs before and after the matches. Some have mentioned that even the drinks they consume can be part of the ritual, for example one interviewee always drinks a special kind of bitter before home games similarly to fans mentioned in Everywhere We Go (Brimson & Brimson, 1996). One interviewed supporter has other rituals; he always remembers what he did during a winning match and tries to repeat the ritual until his team loose. This can include anything from drinking two pints of beer before a match, to having a certain pack of crisps at half time. From the interviews it became clear that these rituals are not very stable and eternal. And their passing character is in tune with the wins and defeats. Almost every one of the fans interviewed stressed that going to a football match was some kind of “release” from their everyday lives, those who work white collar jobs even more so than the others. What we can also see from the interviews carried out is that pub going is still very frequent and some seemingly unimportant detail may play an important part in a fan’s rituals.

**Dual fandom**

In the world of globalized football, it has become a tendency that fans follow the results of competitions in other countries, and therefore, they might become enthusiastic supporters of a foreign club. This is especially so in countries with less remarkable achievements and a lower standard of competitive football, where football enthusiasts become (less traditionally but more rationally) attached to teams from the most televised leagues. In case of English interviewees, the real essence of dual fandom can be grasped especially when an English fan really supports two teams, two English teams. An illustrative description of dual fandom can be found in the following quote:

“Supporting a local team is a kind of local identity, it represents your roots, it’s your heritage. The fact that you were born in Plymouth and the team is called Plymouth is a close association, although the feeling is essentially primitive, tribal and native. The support of a team like Liverpool comes from the desire to want to be connected to success.” (supporter of Plymouth Argyle and Liverpool FC, aged 51)

Two of the interviewees do not support any other teams. They are so consistent and serious about their local team that the notion of dual fandom is totally alien to them. “Another team? In England you have one team and that is it, you cannot change that.” (supporter of Plymouth Argyle, aged 30).

As opposed to their lack of dual fandom David Russell (1999) points out that this was definitely not the case in the 1960s, when fans frequently supported two or more teams, even local ones. It was more than interesting that we had the opportunity to interview two young Plymothians, who come from very different social and educational backgrounds and also have different match-going and cheering habits, by sheer accident, support the same teams i.e. their local team, Plymouth, and Newcastle United. The similarity is even more evident when the reasons for supporting Newcastle are revealed, as they both mention an exciting game as a catalyst for their choosing the ‘Magpies’ as their favourite team. A thrilling victory
can spark a long-lasting interest for a child and both of them have remained loyal to
Newcastle, a team whose location is a 7 hour train journey away. Naturally their dedication to
the local team is essentially different.

“I remember I was scanning through results, when I was five, on teletext and I think I saw
Newcastle have beaten Coventry City 4-0 or something stupid, so I thought I’d follow them,
so I started looking at their results. I remember seeing a match a few weeks later which they
won as well, so here I am today glued to the TV on match day going crazy when they win.”
(supporter of Plymouth Argyle and Newcastle United, aged 17)

The three interviewees, attached to the city of Plymouth, in some way, who are fans of
different teams other than Plymouth also showed similarities in their answers. They all said
that the deeply rooted decisions they made about who to support cannot be changed. One of
them sometimes goes to Plymouth matches but it is because of his general enthusiasm
about football and not because of his genuine fandom.

The consistent and loyal nature of the support of the interviewees involved in this study
may explain their replies to the questions about their attitudes to their teams when the teams
are suffering or underperforming for a long time. Any decline in the interviewees’ interest
in their team can be attributed to their family situations rather than the bad performance of their
teams. It does not mean that they do not get annoyed or irritated by their teams’ bad results
or dip in form, however, their dissatisfaction can only lead to disappointment and not to
radical change in their attitudes to the teams, indicating a traditional, emotion-based fandom.

Local rivalries

The questions about sympathies and rivalries of a football club sparked interesting and
sometimes controversial responses from our interviewees. The very first observation which
can be deduced from the interviews is that if the geographically near clubs are in different
divisions, the particular team and its supporters tend to sympathise with them. Local rivalries
are the “bread and butter” of English football, as one respondent commented, but
unfortunately Plymouth is the only Championship team of not only Devon but the whole
Westcountry. The three other teams in the area, Exeter City, Torquay United and Yeovil
Town, are in lower leagues. In previous years when these teams were in the same league
the rivalries were fierce and the local derby matches were the highlights of the season.
Nowadays, however the resentment and hostility pacified and most of the interviewees agree
that they want other teams from the Westcountry to do well. The two most fervent fans of
Plymouth Argyle raise interesting arguments to support their views on the topic. Although
one of them wants Exeter to do well his reasons are not sympathy and pity, but the desire to
re-vitalise the local Devonian derby games. The other one’s views mirror those of David
Russell (1999) as he goes even further by admitting that he still resents Argyle’s nearest
rivals Exeter and would like to see them slip even further down the leagues.

Although none of the interviewees were ever involved in violent behaviour during football
matches, they agree that emotions run the highest at derby games and it was also
mentioned that the hooligans of Plymouth Argyle were once looked at as one of the most
violent groups. “...The fact remains that among the Central Element (Plymouth Argyle’s
hooligan firm) are a very active group of hooligans and that should not be forgotten” (Brimson
& Brimson, 1998).

As the closest rivals are in different leagues, Plymouth fans and the team as an entity
had to look for other derby games to look forward to. Bristol City and Southampton are two
teams that are in relative vicinity to Plymouth and against whom the matches in the
Championship have been treated as derbies. One supporter describes these rivalries as
“mild” and he explains why:

“Both teams have other, more bitter rivals, Southampton has Portsmouth, Bristol City has
Rovers (Bristol Rovers) and Cardiff, they don’t treat us (Plymouth Argyle) as their main
enemies.” (supporter of Plymouth Argyle, aged 63)
Those interviewees, who are supporting a Premier League team, were able to identify their teams’ rivals: Tottenham for Arsenal, West Ham and Fulham for Chelsea, Sunderland and Middlesbrough for Newcastle. They all realised the regional reasons for these rivalries, however they all admitted to being almost indifferent towards their supposed rivals.

National identification: reflections on the national team and foreign players

The following section deals with the attitudes of the interviewees to the national team and the influx of foreign players to England. All of the supporters we asked were keen supporters of the English national team as well as their local or Premiership team. They would never miss an international game in which England is involved on TV and they are familiar with all the players, they have firm opinions about the chances and one of the participants has already travelled to participate in matches where England played with another national eleven. The two youngest interviewees would like to go to international matches after they become financially independent from their parents and after creating a well-established background.

Most of the interviewees think that they can remain objective and truthful while watching the English national team against a better team and only one of them recalled her hatred of the Germans when England was beaten by Germany in Euro’96. She also remembers resenting even German-made cars for a few days. Most of the participants regard themselves as well-versed football “experts” who can be appreciative of good football in general even by suppressing their sadness or anger. They have the view that they can see their national team in a critical way, as well if it is justifiable.

With some insight into the national feelings of Welsh people it is not surprising that one interviewee considers herself Welsh in the first place and only then Plymouth. She underlines this commitment to Wales by mentioning her support of the Welsh national team as opposed to the English one. It is noteworthy that despite being a teacher of foreign languages, Spanish and Italian, she does not refer to herself as European in any sense. The two younger interviewees identify themselves as Plymouth men without any hesitation and neither of them regards their nationality as important as their home city attachment. Three older interviewees define themselves as English most importantly, whereas the two highly educated true-born Plymothians see themselves as Europeans. The European dimension seems to become more and more important with the increase of educational level. This is underlined by their interest and general knowledge about other footballing cultures outside of Britain. They are the only ones who appear to have some insight on Italian, Spanish or French football.

The interviewees were all aware of the influx of foreign players into the Premier League and also to some extent into the Championship as well, therefore, they all had strong opinions about it. It is interesting to refer back to the question about the participants’ identity i.e. what place they call their home. Those who said they were European first and the interviewee who considered himself Devonian most importantly found the emergence of foreign players beneficial for the English game, whereas those who regard their nationalities as their most defining nature understandably oppose such a great number of foreign players referring to the decreased opportunities for ‘English talent’ as the major destructive force.

“I think it is good for the teams, for some reason, if Plymouth has for example a Hungarian, Hungarians in Plymouth will have much less problems. Generally, it’s good for football. It proves how bad English players are, it is very good for the English players, as they learn new stuff from the foreign players coming in but on the whole I think it has gone too far, they don’t let English talent develop.” (supporter of Plymouth Argyle and Newcastle United, aged 17)
Reflections on the social stratification of fans

In their answers to the questions about the social stratification of their clubs' supporters they all agree that recently football has ceased to be popular with some classes only and they all think that their clubs ranging from Plymouth Argyle to Chelsea have supporters from all social layers including working class, middle class and in some cases upper class. However, they constantly mention the perennial increase of ticket prices and conclude that it is unlikely for someone in a low income bracket to be able to keep up with them for long.

But not only higher class people are targeted by football clubs, it is women and families as well, that they want to attract to football matches (Russell, 1999). This tendency is reinforced, according to all the interviewees by the fact that football is more and more a family sport i.e. the rate of women and younger children is rising continuously (Williams, 2000). They are all convinced that there is no fear on the mothers' side to allow their children to go to matches, whereas this was not the case in the 1980s. Due to the highly developed security systems there is virtually no risk in going to matches anymore. They all welcome this change in making football a peaceful and safe sport but all the supporters involved belonging to the older generation feel nostalgic about the atmosphere in the old days. In spite of their nostalgic feelings they all are of the opinion that football is for everybody these days and if the financial circumstances make it possible, it can become a form of entertainment for families instead of being a rough game only for men.

"There is no such thing in Plymouth, you are as likely to sit next to a high profile doctor as a dock worker living in a one-bedroom apartment... Now Plymouth can be seen as a family club, but I have heard stories from the 80s when Plymouth had the most hated set of fans because of violence." (supporter of Plymouth Argyle and Newcastle United, aged 17)

Discussion

The recent tendencies in English football have brought about major changes in the way the supporters follow their favourite clubs. Our main objective through this paper was to investigate with the help of qualitative research methods the habits and attitudes of 'traditional' English football fans affiliated to the middle class, who cannot be labelled as football hooligans.

First and foremost, it turned out from the interviews that the match-going frequency is higher among younger fans, and has decreased in the individual's life as well. The members of the older generation used to go to more matches in their childhood and teenage years than the younger interviewees do now. Several reasons can be identified behind this phenomenon; however, the interviews suggested the most important one to be the price of going to a football match. The analysis of the interviews revealed that not all traditional football fans attend matches on a regular basis, yet they all feel that football is very much a part of their everyday lives. Nevertheless, none of the supporters interviewed seem to be such ardent fans that their fandom would seriously interfere with their everyday lives; there are no conflicts in their relationships and they have no time management problems because of matches.

As for their habits when at football matches, generally unanimous tendencies can be observed as it seems that although their match-going frequency may differ, their habits are rather similar, as everyone admitted to singing, chanting, shouting and even swearing as they were in pursuit of release from their everyday duties. This indicates the existence of a well-established, traditional football supporter culture in England consisting of certain values and norms that are kept by the vast majority of supporters.

More personal answers were given to the questions about the attitudes of the supporters. The questions focused on the participants' closeness to their teams and as a whole the expected results surfaced. Those that supported two different teams were less connected to either of them than those supporting only one. This second group of interviewees was much
more enthusiastic about rivalries as well. The situation of the local club supported by most of
the fans interviewed, Plymouth Argyle, in the community of Plymouth is prominent according
to the participants. It can be attributed to the rise of the standard of football and successive
promotions. With entering the second tier of English football foreign players are becoming
more and more common in the life of Plymouth Argyle as well. Those fans that have a strong
national identity were opposed to the influx of players from abroad, although admitting that in
a small number they do improve the standard of the English game.

The findings show how the middle class support in Plymouth is changing. Although the
team is becoming more and more a symbol for the community the fans interviewed seem to
be slightly put off by the high cost of going to matches. The general disappointment about the
change in the atmosphere since the emergence of all-seater stadia also takes its toll. All in
all, although the participants, being members of the middle class, are often referred to as the
new target audience of the clubs, it is becoming more and more difficult for them to finance
their supporting, which may result in the gradual decrease in supporter enthusiasm. If these
tendencies prevail, football grounds will soon be populated with mostly businessmen and the
traditional grass-root fans might have to spend a considerable percentage of their salary in
order to stay in the game.

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