

The never-ending story

No other sport is as wrapped up in its own myths as football

10

Grass struggle

Football is trying, but it needs to do better to help protect the environment

40

The creaking of the union

WALES

Could sporting success mean a step toward eventual Welsh independence?

76

Dirty laundry

AZERBAIJAN

When sport serves only the purpose of a nation's leaders, dissent is ever more vital

96

A man apart

The story of Michel Platini, a brilliant romantic to some and a crook to others

16

Keeping the faith

A photo essay of Serbian fans, trying to keep their game alive

44

Excess baggage

CROATIA

The search for identity and the fighting of old demons in post-Yugoslavian football

80

Football dreams in Istanbul

TURKEY

A journey from West Africa to Turkey to chase the chance of professionalism

102

“An endless saga of happy losers”

Philosopher and football fan Wolfram Eilenberger explains the world

22

Quoth the Ravens, “Nevermore”

How a football club in Belarus is doing their small bit in the fight against a dictator

58

After the goldrush

ITALY

The debts of Europe's greatest clubs lay behind the Super League. How far will it go?

86

Little steps

THE NETHERLANDS

A youth team do their bit for the welfare of the planet

122

The year when everything changed

A story from a year of crisis that engulfed Europe and its football

28

Talking football

Every country has its own footballing phrases. Here's our selection

64

Northern exposure

FINLAND

How a teacher took his students to their first big tournament

92

Football's staying home

HUNGARY

Hungarian fans are caught in a struggle between a glorious past and a complicated present

126

The big man goes to Wembley

How Irvine Welsh, Adrian Sherwood and Primal Scream made the most unlikely hit of Euro '96

34

A hair's breadth from glory

Abel Xavier has played and coached all over the world. A portrait of a cosmopolitan icon

68

The summer of our lives

GERMANY

Your first major tournament is one you'll never forget

132

THE WORLD'S GAME AT THE HEART OF EUROPE

The pandemic has given many of us time to assess what is important. And football is, as Carlo Ancelotti said, “the most important of the unimportant things”.

Because of its reliance on nostalgia and statistics, it is easy to forget that the actual game of football takes place in the immediate present. Things happen suddenly, and this is reflected in the language we use. Goals are scored in the blink of an eye, counter-attacks break like lightning, tackles are launched into like rockets.

The pace doesn't stop.

Even as our lives have been put on pause, football has continued along its feverish path, largely unabated, often increased. This was never more the case than during the 72 hours or so in April when the mountains of debt accrued by Europe's top clubs led to the sudden announcement of a Super League. A game awash with oligarchs and vulture funds and state actors staking their claims voiced their dream: football shorn of its meddlesome fans, a purely televisual sport. They were met with threats of recriminations and the howling rage of the fans, until the whole disastrous package fell apart. For now, at least.

We will see what it all means when the dust settles. But a sense of alienation had already been simmering close to the surface of European football. The pandemic has given many of us time to assess what is important. And football is, as Carlo Ancelotti said, “the most important of the unimportant things”.

We aim to address some of the most pertinent issues facing the game and the continent in these pages.

Euro 2020 (in 2021) was not what Michel Platini had in mind when he conceived of a European Championship spread across 12 nations (p. 16). In many ways it is surprising that only two of the host cities, Bilbao and Dublin, have fallen by the wayside so far, unable to commit to allowing fans inside their stadiums. The rest remain with fingers crossed. It will be a grand test for the rebirth of football as a spectator sport, or, as the German philosopher, Wolfram Eilenberger, calls it in his exclusive interview, a “laboratory for the future” (p. 22).

There will be fans present, but not as many as hoped for, so this will be a strange tournament. The German word ‘Geisterspiele’ sums up the experience best. ‘Ghost games.’ But in his essay (p. 10), one of the world's great football writers, David Winner, says that the basics, the infinite web of stories we tell about football, are

unchanged. Just that the mediums we consume it through are different. He argues that the game will always endure.

But as is shown by the problematic hosts Baku (p. 96), as well as Budapest (p. 126), the old idea of using sport to enhance a government's image abroad or at home is still being used to great effect. Maybe the opportunity to scrutinise these places is worth the price of tacit acceptance. Football has certainly helped shine a light upon the fight against the corrupt regime in Belarus (p. 58), just as it makes us face hard truths about nationalism in the Balkans (p. 80). But maybe not.

If the game itself is fast, sometimes football can also move at too glacial a pace. Nicole Selmer (p. 40) and Gerrit-Jan van Heemst (p. 122) show football's fight against the ills being done to our environment has begun, but that it still has far to go. Just as the voices in the fight against racism from the footballing establishment grow louder, but their actions still leave much to be desired. Samindra Kunti puts the Black Lives Matter movement into the context of the pandemic through a personal essay about football in a year of crisis (p. 28).

Meanwhile the pernicious effects of Brexit are an inevitable theme, with London hosting the Euro semi-finals and final (p. 34), and three UK nations represented in the tournament (p. 76). However, first-time participants Finland (p. 92) and North Macedonia would argue against much of this negativity. They want to enjoy themselves, to show there is still a place for romance.

The tragic scenes in Bergamo – and football's role in them is unavoidable – at the time when Euro 2020 was supposed to take place remain embedded in our collective memory. What was supposed to be a party became a fight for life. Just as the spectre of racism still visible off and on the pitch shows us how far we have to go. It can only be hoped that this delayed European Championship gives cause for celebration and reflection – for the joy of what still unites us, for goals too, and moments of wonder, and the chance to start to put things right.

And to be able to revel in the pace of the world's game once again.

JACOB SWEETMAN
Editor, n-ost

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The never-ending story

The strangest thing of all is not how much football has changed in the tumult of the last decade, but how much its fundamentals, the stories and central characters, have stayed the same.

Story
DAVID WINNER

Illustration
PAUL WAAK

1

Fifteen years ago, I set off on a 30,000-mile, month-long journey to watch people watching television. It was the summer of the Germany World Cup and I'd noticed that the tens of thousands of fans at big football matches were becoming irrelevant. They were just the studio audience. Culturally, economically and politically, the audience that mattered more were the hundreds of millions far away, watching on screens. I figured that most journalists would cover the World Cup in the traditional manner, reporting on matches, tactics and personalities. So I decided to do something different.

I travelled to Germany in order to leave Germany because Germany wasn't where the tournament's global impact would be felt. I flew to Berlin, took the U-Bahn to the Olympic Stadium, posed for a picture, then headed back to the airport and spent the next four weeks slowly succumbing to jetlag as I circled the globe, visiting 14 countries for a book.*

2006 now feels like a lost golden age, a time before we'd heard of Twitter or Covid, when non-essential air travel seemed morally acceptable. During that delirious, exhausting month, I had some fine moments. In Buenos Aires,



I tore strips of celebratory confetti and saw people making devil signs to ward off German penalty-takers. In Rome, a Nostradamus-like historian revealed parallels between modern football fandom and the ancient passion for chariot-racing, when red, blue, white and green teams competed in the packed Circus Maximus. (A few weeks later, Italy celebrated their World Cup win with blue-, red-, white- and green-clad fans in the packed ruins of the Circus Maximus.) In a Gdansk bar, I joined patriotic Poles as they watched their team lose to Ecuador. There were tears, thousand-yard stares and, five minutes after the final whistle, a fantastic drunken party.

“The game is not the point,” the bar’s owner explained. “The point is that we are all together.”

In Seoul, I stayed up all night with half a million red-shirted young fans and had lunch with a Korean professor who saw the future. I’ll come back to him presently. Before I set out, I’d assumed that watching football would vary from country to country. I discovered the opposite. Differences of language, climate, religion, and politics seemed to melt away as soon as a game started. Football allowed us to enter a shared imaginative space wholly outside geography. Since then, I’ve been intrigued by the precise nature and mechanics of this space. It’s almost a cliché to say that football has become a universal language for our time. But how exactly does this language work? The game clearly enacts deep human dramas and speaks to our needs and emotions. But why did football become a global behemoth rather than some other sport? What is it about football that gives it its edge over, say, boxing, or baseball, or sumo, or chariot-racing?

2

Football is simple enough for small children to understand, yet so unfathomably complex that even the greatest experts cannot solve its mysteries. For those who care to see, the game is drenched in unexpected signs and meanings. Have you ever noticed how the penalty area and its ‘D’ echoes the rectangle-dome shape of famous sacred buildings? And has anyone ever satisfactorily explained precisely the many meanings of a goal? Is it a sporting version of orgasm? A symbolic ‘kill’? There are various theories to explain football’s hold over us. It’s a quasi-religion; it fulfils tribal needs for belonging; it connects us to ancestral sub-conscious memories of our days as hunter-gatherers.

I think the game’s appeal is rooted in something simpler: its power as a never-ending story.

The importance of this can hardly be overstated. Humans need stories to live by. In the Poetics, Aristotle said all dramas must have a kick-off, half-time, and final whistle. Actually, he said stories need “a beginning, a middle, and an end”. It comes to the same thing. As Aristotle recommended, football also has protagonists and antagonists, though their identity depends on which team you support. Football commentators and journalists of all kinds are the equivalent of the Chorus, guiding us through narratives, drawing out themes such as hubris, nemesis, pathos and other stuff ancient Greeks seem to have liked. Meanwhile, the duration of a match is the same as most movies. The half-time break resembles the pause between acts in theatre and opera. Ninety minutes seems optimal for storytelling: long enough for narrative complexity; short enough to avoid the ennui that afflicts some other spectator sports.

From the deceptively simple structure of a single football match, all else follows: the vast edifice of interlinked, never-ending stories, of seasons, tournaments, club histories, individual careers, entire fan cultures.

Football fits well with other ideas about story too. All clubs, whatever their status, have essentially the same narrative. They all have founding fathers and local heroes, golden ages and dark ages, villains, enemies, triumphs, achievements. And our view of football heroes recalls Joseph

3

In television’s early decades, football administrators were suspicious of the new medium and few games were recorded, let alone shown live. Now the top level of the game functions entirely in conjunction with cameras. We have moved a long way indeed from the days when the only way to see a match was to attend in person. Standing or sitting in a stadium, no two spectators would see a game in quite the same way. But now the visual representation of the story is standardised and easily marketed.

Thanks to Covid, for most people the only way to watch is via a screen, with every image selected for us. We see only what the director shows us.

And with VAR, television has moved all the way from being an observer to directly intervening in matches. TV has certainly damaged localism. Now that everyone has equal access to the same images, is there a fundamental difference, say, between a Liverpool fan in Kuala Lumpur and an old Koppite in Bootle? Until the pandemic, I wondered if social media, facilitated by the new, ubiquitous mini-screens on phones, might have disrupted one of Aristotle’s other rules, namely that a drama should have unity of time, place and action.

After all, following a match on Twitter can jumble a timeline until a match resembles a Nicolas Roeg movie. You might, for example, first see that your team has scored a goal, then learn that VAR cancelled it. Someone may have posted a clip with Arabic commentary. Then someone gets a red card, and everyone on Twitter argues about the red card. The other team equalise, then score an earlier goal. Now there’s a penalty. After the final score, up-to-the-minute team news arrives from three hours earlier: the guy who got sent off has recovered from injury and will play.

But is this really so different from conventional journalism? Read any old-style match report or watch any brief highlights package and you’ll notice the huge gap between those constructs and the complexity and rhythms of an actual full-length game. How do we make sense of this? In our minds, we take messy reality and rearrange it into familiar patterns – heroes and villains, joy or despair, status, and so on. French

Aristotle said all dramas must have a kick-off, half-time, and final whistle.

Campbell’s book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell studied foundational religious stories from every part of the world and noticed they all had the same basic structure: an apparently ordinary but remarkable boy (it’s usually a boy) from a humble background is “called to action”, leaves home, undergoes a series of dramatic journeys, trials and adventures, has various helpers, wins a great victory, and ultimately bestows a great gift or “boon” on his people. The pattern fits the tales told of Jesus, Moses and Buddha. George Lucas explicitly used Campbell’s work to build the character of Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. And football writers unconsciously deploy the same tropes when describing great players such as Pelé, Cruyff, Maradona, Zidane, Ronaldo, Messi and others.

Perhaps most crucially, the game’s ever-burgeoning global power and reach is tied to its relationship with television, another vehicle for storytelling. Once upon a time TV and football were awkward bedfellows, but they have now fused. Rather like Jeff Goldblum and the fly in *The Fly*, the two forms now constitute a single voracious organism. Should we be afraid, very afraid? The combination is certainly changing our relationship with the game.

* PUBLISHED FIRST IN DUTCH AS THE 2006 WORLD CUP EDITION OF HARD GRAS, UNDER THE TITLE *DE HELE WERELD ZAG HET* (THE WHOLE WORLD SAW IT), AND LATER IN ENGLISH AS *AROUND THE WORLD IN 90 MINUTES*.

film director Jean-Luc Godard said a story “should have a beginning, a middle and an end – but not necessarily in that order”. And in one of his films he had veteran Hollywood director Sam Fuller define his medium in terms that (as long as one remembers sporting death tends to be symbolic) also apply to football:

“Film is like a battleground,” said Fuller. “Love, hate, action, death. In one word, emotion.”

An alien observing a football match might notice the physicality of players’ movements, the colours of shirts, white lines and green space, the architecture of the surroundings. Watching the same match, and guided by our Chorus, we see stories. And what does all this have to do with Euro 2020? Well, we fear that the pandemic may have broken football in some profound and irreversible way. It has, after all, done much to change society, the economy and our personal lives. We know that many small clubs, and perhaps even associations, will go bust. Large swathes of local and national football across Africa and Asia have already been laid waste by the televisual dominance of the Premier League. The biggest clubs and most powerful ruling bodies will increase their dominance. And even when fans venture back into stadiums, it’s hard to picture the full return of the boisterous old studio audiences. Spanish TV has been experimenting not only with fake crowd noise, but with entirely fake crowds.

Large swathes of football across Africa and Asia have already been laid waste by the televisual dominance of the Premier League.

4

But for all that, has Covid destroyed the game at its most fundamental level, as a story that makes itself up and never stops? The evidence of the last year suggests rather powerfully that it has not. Perhaps you remember the first months of lockdown. Almost as soon as live football stopped everywhere except Belarus, low-quality live YouTube streams of matches between teams like Shakhtyor Soligorsk and Neman Grodno began to attract huge global audiences. The football was terrible, but the drama, even with teams we knew little about, worked well enough.

The Belarus league certainly got more international attention than the country’s stolen election in August.

As it happens, I didn’t enjoy those Belarus games. I worried that, without Covid protections, players might get sick providing me with entertainment. Instead, I fled into the past, and soon became addicted to old football on YouTube. Combining virtuality with ersatz time travel, I particularly enjoyed a series of complete England-Scotland games from the 1960s, fascinated by the games’ slowness and antique tactics, but thoroughly drawn in, and marvelling at the way the story worked just as well as if I was watching live.

In any case, football soon found a way to carry on despite the pandemic. And the new conditions created intriguing possibilities. When the Bundesliga restarted before the Premier League, I found myself watching Eintracht Frankfurt matches on Zoom with a friend in Washington DC. Euro 2020 was postponed, but the later rounds of the Champions League, all played in one place and run like a mini-world-cup, were electrifying.

“The game is not the point,” the bar’s owner explained.
“The point is that we are all together.”

Since then, we’ve adjusted surprisingly smoothly to the new normal. Fake crowd noise no longer seems unnatural. Interest in football resumed without a blip. Under various forms of lockdown, football may even have become more important to us as a shared story than it was before the virus. There is no reason to expect TV audiences across Europe to feel any less intensely about the delayed Euro 2020 than they would have done under old conditions. Every match is liable to disprove Jock Stein’s famous line that “football is nothing without fans”.

So where is all this taking us? It seems to me that Covid has simply accelerated change already underway. And I remember my conversation 15 years ago with Dr Hongik Chung, Professor of Cultural Policy at the Graduate School of Public Administration at Seoul National University. I’d pitched to him my ideas about football as a TV-mediated phenomenon, but he took the notion a few steps further. He predicted that within 20 years sport would come to be seen purely as a money-making enterprise, chief among the new, software-based entertainment industries that would become increasingly important. Football, he explained, makes no physical material. It simply produces images for television, which had already become the most important place for the “consumption” of the sport. Looking ahead, he correctly predicted that this would intensify.

We used to think of the game in a romantic way, as a visceral and highly physical thing: hurtling bodies, tightly packed crowds, in one word: emotion. But he saw through all that. The game was becoming an entertainment commodity, immaterial, programmed. “Football is software,” he told me. “That is the future.”

DAVID WINNER IS A JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR. HIS BOOKS *BRILLIANT ORANGE* AND *THOSE FEET* WERE NOMINATED FOR WILLIAM HILL SPORTSBOOK OF THE YEAR.

A MAN

As a player, Michel Platini was like a graceful force of nature. And as a functionary, he came up with the idea of a pan-European Championship. But now he barely even watches football. This is a story about a man scorned.

APART

Story
DOMINIK BARDOW

Michel Platini is buoyant, he's in a fantastic mood. It's the end of June in 2012 and the Frenchman is still in charge of Uefa, the football association of Europe. He's giving a press conference in Kiev, ostensibly to take stock of his successful European Championship in Poland and Ukraine. Platini, the 57-year-old bon vivant, still has the same child-like twinkle of joy in his eye that he had as a midfield genius for Juventus and France. Often, it was the last thing that his transfixed opponents saw before he made fools of them.

He says that he has drunk "a lot of vodka" over the last few weeks, dragging his gag out further with the line: "It's a local alcoholic drink." Then he says something that appears to be yet another joke. "I want to share an idea with you," he purrs to the gathered press, leaning in. "How about a Euro 2020 not hosted by one or two countries, but by all of Europe?" The room erupts. "I had a feeling that that might grab your attention," smirks Platini.

This time, however, he's not joking.

His reasoning is simple. To celebrate the 60th anniversary of the tournament, which first took place in France in 1960, "we will play in 12 stadiums in 12 different countries, so they'll only need to build one stadium and one airport each". As well as being a romantic proposition, it was one that made some sense, considering the economic difficulties of the time. But wouldn't fans have to fly back and forth between Lisbon, Cardiff and Tbilisi, someone interjects. "There are low-fare airlines, that's not a problem," says Platini in an attempt to placate. But the room does not want to be placated, they want answers. Question after question fly towards him, and the visionary shrugs them off, his eyebrows and hands raised almost apologetically. "People, it's only an idea! Maybe we won't actually do it!"

In the end, what sounded like a joke became a reality – just not quite as Platini intended. For starters, the tournament wouldn't be taking

Platini was top scorer in Euro '84 as France became European champions.



place until 2021, albeit for quite unforeseeable reasons. And the man behind the idea is no longer president of Uefa. For in 2015, Platini was banned from all football-related activities for four years, accused of certain financial irregularities. The then-president of Fifa, Sepp Blatter, had allegedly slipped him two million Swiss francs – for which Fifa banished them both. At the end of 2019, a year and a half after his punishment expired, the Frenchman was still fighting for his reputation, making objections, making statements about prosecutors. Making a noise. For Michel Platini, this is about his life's work.

There has always been plenty of criticism about this particular tournament. "A Euros like this would have no heart and no soul," said Sepp Blatter in 2013 in an interview with the German magazine, *kicker*. "A tournament should be played in one country. That's how you create an identity. That's how you create euphoria." In 2016, the *Tagesspiegel* commented: "This is not how you generate a tournament atmosphere. Uefa is turning the European Championship into an event made for TV." And, like it or not, the fans who usually travel to games would now be more likely to watch the tournament at home on their televisions. And that was even before Covid-19 struck.

If you want to understand Euro 2020, you need to understand its inventor. What drove Platini? Was it European ideals? Romance? Economic constraints? The politicking of sport?

"The journalists were looking at me, astonished, as though I had lost my mind. But I had never been so serious. [...] This time, we would bring the Euros to the fans rather than bringing the fans to the Euros. A European Championships for all of Europe. A joyous tournament for all the nations and cities that have never had a chance to host."

That's how Platini wrote it himself – or at least had it written for him – in his 2019 book *Entre nous* (Between you and me). There is no English version to date – it has appeared only in French and Italian – and for 240 pages the ousted president gives an insight into his thoughts and career as a functionary. It is more or less a follow-up to his 1987 biography *Ma vie comme un match* (My life as a game), in which he looks back on his playing career and helps us discover how a man who enchanted so many on the way to

becoming European champion of 1984 became this controversial... bureaucrat. And how he was driven by the same motivations in both careers.

"One day, when I confessed my lack of interest in literature to my friend Pierre Lescure," Platini writes, "he responded with this delightful sentence: 'But Michel! You don't need to read! Your life is already a novel.' Pierre was right." He continues humbly on in this vein: "It is a novel in which I played every role: footballer, trainer of the French national team, organiser of the 1998 World Cup in France, Uefa president. A unique career. [...] I treasure this reality every single morning, when I wake up and see the majesty of Mont Blanc reveal itself before my eyes."

It's made perfectly clear that Platini finds his removal from office and his Swiss exile painful. In the introduction, he quotes the philosopher Montesquieu – "There is no greater tyranny than that which is perpetrated under the shield of the law and in the name of justice" – before entertaining the reader with page after page of delightful, amused bitterness. It's hard to avoid the thought that there is no better language in the world than French for the airing of ills perpetuated and heinous grievances.

Platini writes this about Blatter: "It was never easy with Sepp. When it came to me, I think he had cultivated some sort of dual complex: one of superiority in suggesting that I'm stupid, and one of envious inferiority due to my playing career and popularity. A syndrome of attraction and repulsion that at times bordered on schizophrenia." Platini accuses his former mentor of dragging him into the abyss in the bribery affair. From his perspective, it was merely a belated settlement, a fee that he was owed.

It is even somewhat reminiscent of the memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte, the great French conqueror who wanted to change Europe with his new ideas but ended up bitter and exiled to the island of St. Helena. Another thing that connects the books by Napoleon and Platini is that very few people have actually read them.

Which is a pity, because Platini conjures up some lovely rhetorical devices and presents himself as the alternative to all the technocrats and schemers in the world of football – they were all just in it for the money. Why, Michel, the reader feels compelled to exclaim, why couldn't you just

PLATINI ON A VISIT TO ARMENIA IN 2007 DURING HIS FIRST YEAR AS UEFA PRESIDENT. PHOTO: VAHAN STEPANYAN

let it be? You could have left us remembering your beauty, repeating your legends.

Platini describes his moment of epiphany as an up-and-coming functionary. In 1990, he was part of a Fifa task force that stood up to the stuffy custodians of the rules, pushing through new laws to outlaw goalkeepers picking up back-passes and punishing the tackle from behind with an instant red card. He was sure that both changes would greatly benefit the beautiful vision of the game that he loved so much. These successes left him "convinced that I could exert real influence without pulling on my boots and scoring goals". He understood that football needed a new vision if it was to maintain its universal magic. "I was 35 years old, and I could feel that I would one day perform this role."

When he was elected Uefa president in 2007, he dedicated himself to his visions. He started involving smaller associations ever more by increasing the size of the European Championship, introducing the Nations League and expanding the European club competitions. With Financial Fair Play, he provided for greater equality between the rich and poor clubs of Europe. Well, according to him, at least. He also passionately battled against the introduction of video referees. "We must protect the magic of this sport, with all its randomness and imperfections," Platini wrote. "Over the course of my Uefa presidency, even if things weren't always perfect, I always tried to find a balance between the game and the business."

Not all of his decisions from that time are compatible with this statement though – like his vote for Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup.

But maybe even Michel Platini's critics will realise that he was, at the end of the day, a disappointed romantic, a true European, with all of the little imperfections which that entails.

He writes that he won't ever grumble about his suspension by Fifa. Before then going on to grumble for the next 240 pages. "I never felt like I was suspended. Never!" No organisation could stop him from "breathing football, living football and being football". Still, he says his ban feels as though he's been shown a red card for no reason at all.

He's in his mid-sixties now, and Platini writes that he leads a quieter life full of opportunities to reflect. He goes to the theatre, he travels, he goes for walks in the Swiss mountains and he spends time with his grandchildren. He takes joy in watching them play football, but he doesn't watch many matches on the television. Having organised this summer's tournament himself, it is "frustrating to be condemned to watch it from the sofa".

At least this fate is one that Michel Platini will be sharing with football fans all over Europe.

DOMINIK BARDOW IS A JOURNALIST FROM BERLIN, WHO SPENT MANY YEARS FOCUSING ON UEFA AND FIFA.
Translated by Stephen Glennon

THE LITTLE MUSEUM OF FOOTBALLING HISTORIES

1

Story
JACOB SWEETMAN

Illustration
RENÉ STAEBLER

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS NAMES IN BELGIAN FOOTBALL ISN'T CONNECTED WITH A MOMENT OF GLORY, A SAVING TACKLE, A JINKING RUN. IN FACT JEAN-MARC BOSMAN ONLY EVER SCORED FOUR GOALS. BUT HIS WIN IN THE EUROPEAN HIGH COURT MEANT THAT ALL FOOTBALLERS WOULD BE FREE TO CHOOSE WHERE THEY PLAY. HE CHANGED THE GAME MORE THAN ALMOST ANYONE.



‘‘AN ENDLESS SAGA OF HAPPY LOSERS’’

Interview
NIK AFANASJEW

An interview with German philosopher **Wolfram Eilenberger** on the state of football, the state of Europe, on VAR and empty stadia, and why Don Quixote still sums up the game in the 21st century.

MR EILENBERGER, MANY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE PRESENT AS A PERMANENT CRISIS. WHAT ROLE CAN FOOTBALL PLAY AT THIS TIME?

When one of the fundamental questions of our society is one of unity and variety, of ‘we’ and ‘I’, and consequently of how individuals can form a collective, football offers a special opportunity for integration.

HOW SO?

It is a sport like no other, in that it finds space and a function for every form of individuality.

BECAUSE IT NEEDS DIMINUTIVE DRIBBLERS AS MUCH AS IT NEEDS PHYSICALLY IMPOSING PLAYERS?

Yes. In addition, football is a stage for inability rather than ability. The inherent challenge is to control a ball with an extremity that is perfectly unsuitable for the task. When we watch football, we are watching people failing to overcome an impossible challenge. That is the crux of the matter.

FOOTBALL AS PERMANENT FAILURE?

On the pitch, the players are constantly creating more complexity than they can possibly overcome. For most people, this is a fundamental experience in this current era of the never-ending illusion of control. With that necessarily comes the loss of control. Using the medium of ball sports, this experience becomes intensely tangible without any immediate penetration into our day-to-day life.

WERE THINGS REALLY DIFFERENT BEFORE?

Team ball sports did not become the central modern physical activity as a matter of course. They have existed in their current form for no more than 200 years. They are therefore equiprimordial with modern Europe

and the metropolitan experience. There is a notion of modernity put across by the poet Charles Baudelaire that highlights the contingent, the uncontrollable, the ephemeral. If these are the main traits of the urban experience, they are mirrored in football and its aesthetic of uncontrollability. That is the meaning of the sentence ‘football is our life’.

IS THE CURRENT PANDEMIC CHANGING THE BALANCE OF THIS INTERACTION?

Not fundamentally. The pandemic highlights that we are marooned within a context that we do not control. Football does that too. When a person is overwhelmed, football is a medium that is always there for him.

A MEANS OF DISTRACTION?

In situations of grave crisis, games can open windows and horizons of hope. So it is more than mere distraction. There are countless ways for a person to find distraction, but at times like this, football is a gift in which the calming comfort of daily life walks hand in hand with the candid and the intense.

BUT THE GAME IS DIFFERENT WITH EMPTY STADIUMS.

Now it is becoming clearer than ever before that the result on the pitch is only a small part of the total experience. And it is poorer as long as spectators are not there to enrich the event with their presence. Studies have shown that opponents take longer to warm up without fans. A certain level of aggression is simply no longer there.

COULD IT BE THAT WE’RE NOW SEEING A ‘Purer’ FORM OF FOOTBALL?

If you define a purity ideal from a technocratic perspective, then you could certainly perceive it like that. For me, football is primarily about physical intensity and the loss of control. Both have been diminished by

the pandemic. In addition, thanks to artificial turf, video reviews and arenas with roofs, there are fewer and fewer uncontrollable elements. From my perspective, in other words, the beauty of football lies in its intrinsic impurity. Football is contaminated by anything that tames it. That includes playing in empty stadia.

OVER THE LAST YEAR AND A HALF, PLAYERS HAVE HAD TO BECOME USED TO PLAYING IN EMPTY STADIUMS. WHAT EFFECT IS THAT HAVING ON THEM?

Let's not forget that footballers only ever knew [this experience] for years when they played for youth teams. Hardly anyone ever went to those games. So it is not a new challenge for a young player. The extraordinary experience for him will be games with spectators.

BUT WHEN IT COMES TO EVERYDAY LIFE, THE PLAYERS ARE ALSO SUFFERING FROM THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC.

Of course they are, but I expect that it's a lot less than most people. Professional football players live in a supervised bubble in which intersections with normal life are not desirable. I doubt that the world in which they live has changed very much, or that the daily life of a top player over the last 18 months is particularly different from the 18 months before that.

WHAT TACTICAL TRENDS DO YOU EXPECT TO SEE IN EURO 2020, THE PANDEMIC NOTWITHSTANDING?

One long-term mega-trend that I've noticed is the 'basketballisation' of football. Physically large players are more and more in demand. This is related to the fact that set-pieces are becoming ever more important.

EARLIER, YOU SAID THAT FOOTBALL HAS A PLACE FOR EVERY FORM OF INDIVIDUALITY. DOESN'T THE IDEA OF 'BASKETBALLISATION' CONTRADICT THAT?

Absolutely. It counteracts this idea.

The focus on set-pieces is robbing the game of opportunities and dulling the attraction, and the increase in penalties that has come with VAR is the most damaging development.

Absurd, accidental and absolutely insignificant touches of the ball with a hand now decide the course of a game. Dreadful.

MAYBE PLAYERS ARE JUST TOO TIRED AFTER SO MANY ENERGY-SAPPING MATCHES AND TIRELESS COUNTER-PRESSING TO HAVE ANY REAL EFFECT ON THE GAME.

The load on the players will definitely play a major role. It could also give smaller nations a chance, since their players are less impacted. Many of them play for the top teams, but a lot of them are backup players. Actually, I'd say that England are probably the favourites for the title. But the English league has so many games, and their players might be completely exhausted before the tournament even starts. Tired players can't win.

AT THE START OF THE PANDEMIC, MANY FANS HOPED THAT THIS WAS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FOOTBALL TO GROUND ITSELF.

These days, you hear it said frequently that it's becoming clear that football is only about money. Aha! Who'd have thought it! Come on. That perspective is a bit too kitschy for me, like when parents declare after the birth of their child that they now understand what really matters. So if clubs are supposed to recognise because of the pandemic that less is sometimes more, all they need to do is take a look at their bank account to quickly figure out that less is in fact less.

CAN TECHNICAL INNOVATIONS AND INCREASED COMMERCIALISATION EVER BE ROLLED BACK?

It's definitely possible, even if I think it's very unlikely. With video reviews, it's clear that it's like a drug with extreme side-effects. Not only is it highly unsuitable when it comes to containing and resolving controversial incidents in a match, it also interferes deeply with the internal logic of the game. I would love it if, after a few years, we stop and take stock of the situation and say: 'We tried. It failed. Let it be. The game is suffering too much.'

FOOTBALL IS OFTEN SAID TO BE A MIRROR OF SOCIETY. IS THAT FAIR? It's more of a future laboratory than



PHOTO: MICHAEL HECK

“THESE DAYS YOU HEAR IT SAID FREQUENTLY THAT IT'S BECOMING CLEAR THAT FOOTBALL IS ONLY ABOUT MONEY. AHA! WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT IT!”

a mirror. This means that developments are visible earlier. So this new total game, free from undesirable influences and controlled by cameras, is a technological surveillance fantasy. The utopian thinking behind it is that at some point we will no longer have to make judgements, because technology will unambiguously decide for us. It will de facto remove the essence of being human from us. And in so doing, it will eliminate any freedom and openness in the most wonderful game that humanity has produced: football!

HAVE THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 RECONTEXTUALISED FOOTBALL?

They have caused a decontextualisation, an uncanny placelessness. When Leipzig and Liverpool face off against each other in Budapest in front of empty stands, it is clear that we are experiencing a type of meta ghost game. It's almost as though any player could suddenly appear wearing the other team's jersey from one moment to the next.

OR APPEAR IN A DIFFERENT STADIUM. OR ON AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE OCEAN.

The football that we enthusiastically consume remains for most fans a regional phenomenon. A region, a nation, these are comprehensible criteria. My district. My emotion. Without solid local roots, very few living beings thrive. That goes for people too.

WILL THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL TEAMS AND CLUB TEAMS CHANGE?

Everything depends on how nations develop in a European context – whether they are seen as an obstacle to be overcome, or as a form of regional rootedness that isn't just something to be tolerated, but rather something to be encouraged and supported. Of course, the idea of 'nation' is much more problematic in Germany than anywhere else. But for smaller nations, the idea of a national team can be an important vehicle for their national identity. Think about Belgium. Take away Eddy Merckx and the national football team and you're left with just quarrelling provinces without a king.

“STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT OPPONENTS TAKE LONGER TO WARM UP WITHOUT FANS. A CERTAIN LEVEL OF AGGRESSION IS SIMPLY NO LONGER THERE.”

HAVE WE NOT BEEN LIVING IN A POSTNATIONALIST ERA FOR A LONG TIME NOW?

That's not my impression. As cultural entities, people remain connected to nations or other such communities. It's important that a positive identification with one's own does not mean degradation of others. Of course, countless countries are experiencing national chauvinistic tendencies. But the idea of a nation does not necessarily mean something disparaging to others. That's what separates liberal-minded patriots from envious national chauvinists.

AT THE BEGINNING, YOU SPOKE ABOUT THE FEELING OF BEING OVERWHELMED, SOMETHING WHICH AFFECTS CONTEMPORARY HUMANS AS WELL AS FOOTBALL. INDIVIDUAL COUNTRIES ALSO INCREASINGLY APPEAR OVERWHELMED WHEN IT COMES TO HOSTING MAJOR INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENTS.

Yes, individual states are inevitably reaching their limits. What's interesting about this question is that there are two models for organising Europe, two mythical origins. The Greek model is based on pluralism and is reflected in German federalism, for example. The Roman model is a central state and we find this format in France. Ironically, it was Michel Platini – a Frenchman who is familiar with the charms of the central state – who organised this European Championship as a celebration of European pluralism. I like this idea of a federal logic.

THERE IS A PARTICULAR SENSE OF ANTICIPATION FROM THE COUNTRIES WHO WILL BE PARTICIPATING FOR THE FIRST TIME: NORTH MACEDONIA AND FINLAND. YOU LIVED IN FINLAND FOR A LONG TIME. WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT?

Finnish culture is not as focused on winning as German culture is. In Germany, we are neurotic about winning all the time. No one understands the idea of participating with pride. This perspective sometimes makes us narrow-minded and mean-spirited. For years, the Finns have been out of sight of the football

gods and now their main aim is to show the world their ice-blue colours.

BUT THE FINNISH FANS WOULDN'T HAVE ANYTHING AGAINST A VICTORY OR TWO.

The team probably doesn't have enough about it for a major surprise, but the fans do. When it comes to fan culture, the Finns will be the new Irish or the new Icelanders of the event.

IN ANY CASE, THE STORY OF THE UNDERDOGS FROM THE NORTH IS POTENTIALLY A VERY SYMPATHETIC ONE.

And football needs stories. Great stories. They don't have to be stories of victories. Football is like a novel because it depicts a paradise of individualism. When it comes to a player's career or individual games, it's probably more like a serialised novel. And Don Quixote, as the founding document of a playful Europe, isn't a wonderful and captivating story because its hero was victorious, but rather because he battles, runs and cheers for his dream. We must imagine football as an endless saga of happy losers.

WOLFRAM EILENBERGER IS A PHILOSOPHER, AUTHOR AND FOOTBALL FAN. OFTEN, ALL AT ONCE.

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