

## Football, Racism, and Nationalism

Time moved in slow motion as Shaqiri, Switzerland's talismanic forward, raced through on goal. The Serbian defence desperately trying to catch him. As he reached the penalty area, the opposition goalkeeper scrambled towards him while a Serb centre back had gotten within arm's length. He poked the ball past the 'keeper and the ball rolled agonizingly slowly towards the goal. As it trickled over the line, half the stadium erupted with ecstasy. I went absolutely crazy celebrating my national team's 2-1 victory in the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Living away from my home country for the past 13 years has meant that soccer is my strongest link to Switzerland. Games like this generate a sense of intense national pride. However, this match turned out to be far more than just a football game. The Swiss scorers, both of Kosovan descent, celebrated their goals with the Albanian eagle gesture - a resounding statement against Serbia's refusal to acknowledge Kosovo's independence. It was only in the aftermath of the match that I realized the true significance of what I had just witnessed. I was conflicted between the pride I felt towards the Swiss team and the frustration with potential violence that could have sparked within the stadium. In football, nationalism is part of the beauty and danger of the game. There is no parallel to the sport's raw emotion and passion, but it comes with a risk.

Racism can be a by-product of soccer's passionate, and sometimes extreme, nationalism. Be it at Stamford Bridge in London, the San Siro in Milan, or the Camp Nou in Barcelona, there has been an alarming increase in racial abuse. In an incredibly internationalized and diverse sport, it is disheartening that this issue is so prominent in what is supposed to be called *The World's Game*. As someone whose life revolves around football, I am shocked at how poorly fans around the world are representing a sport that is supposed to bring people together. Is the nationalism and racism purely a reflection of the shifting political climate? Or is it linked to the rivalrous and explosive nature of soccer?

Part of football's allure is its representation of the world and its people. On the field: Brazilian flair and creativity, German efficiency and unity, English intensity and passion. International football is a beautiful "way to unite, promote, and celebrate" nationalism, Dutch national team fans wear wooden shoes, Mexican supporters wear sombreros, and Brazilians perform the samba dance (Bogdanov). Since the 1990s, the diversity on the field mirrors the mass globalization of our society. Incredibly almost 70% of the English Premier League's players are foreign, in Italy it is 56%, and Germany has 49% (Sky Sports). The result is an incredibly high level of competitive football with players from all around the world dreaming of making it to Europe's top leagues.

Part of football's danger is its representation of the world. Politicians' increasingly rash and xenophobic rhetoric fuels abusive and racist language in the stands. More and more often, I draw parallels between Brexit and the bananas thrown at Arsenal players, Salvini's popularity and the abuse of black Italian striker Balotelli, or the rise of France's right-wing and anti-immigrant ideology surrounding the French national team. Western Europe's frightening political shift to the right is evident in both hate crime statistics and racial abuse surrounding football. The new technological age of social media has also supplied an extended platform for this abuse. A significant difference with soccer today is that the racism players experience doesn't stop when they leave the field. Instead, they are constantly bombarded with xenophobic insults. In 2019's massive Liverpool vs Manchester City game, the online abuse towards Sterling and van Dijk, two players of color, was 27,0 times higher than average (Okwonga). This sadly proves that racism and abuse surge in big games, where passions and tensions run highest.

It might not be the age of football hooliganism, where violence, nationalism, and racism ruled the stands, but the re-emergence of the latter two has never been more undeniable.

### Özil, Class, and Immigrants

It is no secret that Mesut Özil effortlessly glides across a football pitch. His immaculate control of the ball. The subtlety to his every move. His ability to execute an impossible pass. He has mastered the game of simplicity. At his best, as the raucous Arsenal fans chant his name, he is unplayable. Untouchable.

It is no secret that despite his immeasurable talent Özil is largely known as one of the most divisive players in world football. His baggy eyes, droopy posture, and dismissive nature has led to a barrage of insults: claims that he has no passion, that he doesn't care about his club. The image of a professional 31-year-old man hurling his gloves to the floor or flailing his arms following a teammate's poor pass has become a representation of a once-great talent.

It is no secret that the issues surrounding Germany's five-time player of the year have a far wider reach than football. The 2018 World Cup saw the enigmatic German unfairly scapegoated for his team's embarrassing performances. **"I am a German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose"** summed up the pent up frustrations that led to his retirement from the national team (Sarihan). In an effort to bring attention to a structural issue of racism and xenophobia, he received little to no German support. Instead the 5-time German Player of the Year had his statement labelled as "a confused account with Germany" and a "weepy resignation" by his country's media (Ibid). His attachment to his Turkish background was wrongly targeted as proof that his loyalties lay elsewhere. Proof that the German national team lacked pride, commitment, and, most importantly *real Germans*. His crucial role in a golden generation of German talent—forgotten. His gold medal from the 2014 World Cup—forgotten. His choice of Germany over Turkey—forgotten.

It is no secret that racism has once again found a home in football.

### Salah, Brexit, and Islamophobia

“Mo Salah-la-la-la-la

Mo Salah-la-la-la-la

If he’s good enough for you, he’s good enough for me

If he scores another few

Then I’ll be Muslim, too.

If he’s good enough for you, he’s good enough for me,

He’s sitting in a mosque, that’s where I want to be.” (The Redmen TV)

March 7th, 2018: Rowdy Liverpool fans chant in delight on a fantastic night in Porto.

A 5-0 thrashing of the Portuguese side in the Champions League has been well received by the traveling fans. It was Liverpool’s usual *Heavy Metal Football*. Playing the game at the highest intensity, pressing their opposition high up the field, forcing mistakes. It is fast flowing aggressive football at its best. At the heart of this is Mohammad Salah.

The *Egyptian King* has been at the center of Liverpool’s extraordinary recent revival. His quick feet, relentless determination, and phenomenal ability to put the ball in the back of the net make him a nightmare for defenders. Earlier that season, Liverpool took on their main rivals Everton. With the game at 0-0 in a snow-filled Anfield stadium, Salah created a truly spectacular moment. Receiving the ball on the edge of Everton’s penalty box, he outmuscled one defender, slid the ball past another, before curling the ball around a third and well beyond the reach of the flailing goalkeeper. This was just one of 32 remarkable and record-breaking English Premier League goals during the 2017/18 season, each sending the rambunctious Liverpool crowd into delirium. From ‘Salah running down the wing’, to ‘We’ve got Salah,’ the fans have done anything but hide their adoration for their hero with Salah chants taking

over Liverpool and the world. However, the ‘I’ll be Muslim too’ chant is more than just a chant—it’s a player transcending football.

Salah is an openly devout Muslim in Brexit Britain, where extreme nationalism and xenophobia have disgracefully found a home. The UK Home Office’s figures show the alarming increase in race-related football incidents, and Liverpool’s magician has not been spared. In England and Wales, reported incidents increased from 68 during the 2015/16 season to 152 in the 2018/2019 one, despite a decline in the early 2010s with 99 in the 2013/2014 season (Bassam). Pundit and ex-player, Gary Neville has directly drawn the parallel to the anti-foreigner rhetoric politicians like Boris Johnson have been employing. While Catherine West, Labour’s shadow sports minister, stated that the incidents “coincid[ed] with the EU referendum and the normalization of bigotry that it ushered in” (Ibid). Home Office’s hate crime statistics provide evidence of her claims. Their data shows that racially and religiously motivated hate crime has increased by almost 70% from the start of the Brexit campaign on April 16th 2016 (around 3,200) to March 2019 (around 5,500), numbers peaking following the referendum result and during the 2017 terrorist attacks (Grahame). Furthermore, between 2013/14 to 2018/19, Islamophobic hate crimes have more than doubled in London, from 577 to a shocking 1,273 (Ibid).

In such a toxic and xenophobic footballing world, watching and re-watching the video of fans with thick Liverpudlian accents chanting that they’ll convert to Islam and go to a mosque puts a smile on my face. He is adored by not only Liverpool fans, but supporters around the world. He’s just a nice guy and a fantastic player to watch, how can you hate him? But it’s more than that. With the never-ending news of players being racially abused on and off the pitch, this is a rare glimpse of hope that football really can unite people. In a New Yorker article, Yasmine Al-Sayyad describes Salah “as one [of] the world’s most visible Muslims, and—even rarer—one with a distinctly Arab background” (Al-Sayyad). The

mercurial Egyptian steps on to the pitch cupping his hands in prayer and celebrates goals by prostrating, as a result “part of Salah’s charm is that he’s not an outwardly political figure addressing Islamophobia in England...he is able to effectively erode negative views of Muslims and challenge Islamophobia, just by being himself” (Ibid). *The Cult of Salah* has created a platform to fight against the growing Islamophobic and anti-immigration sentiments in the UK. Two Muslim Liverpool fans, Bhula and Bodi, shared that supporters have become more accepting of their “praying and...behavior” and that the Salah effect has made people “feel more emboldened to practice their faith” (Middle East Eye). These were the same supporters pictured and mocked for praying during an FA cup game at Anfield in 2015. Salah is truly transcending the game of football...

Only days after the creation and viral spread of that fantastic Salah chant, the nation witnessed the truly horrible creation of ‘Punish a Muslim Day’—flyers were sent around the country listing ways people could harm Muslims in their area. A year later, Salah stepped up to take a corner in a game against West Ham. As he waited to whip the ball into the box, West Ham fans began jeering at him aggressively, not uncommon in intense football matches, before one fan shouted “fucking Muslim cunt” (Guardian Football). He went on to take the corner, and the game continued. A month later, he was targeted as a ‘bomber’ by Chelsea fans before a match. A game that took place 1000 miles from Liverpool, a game that neither Salah nor Liverpool were involved in.

So much for this nice guy who’s loved by the world.

### **Bananas, Backheels, and Bigotry**

32 years ago, John Barnes back-heeled a banana. The image of the Liverpool and England legend with his head down, right leg kicking out behind him, and a banana spinning away is iconic (Lewis). Rival fans had thrown the fruit at him, football in the '80s was dominated by hooligans and racism.

6 years ago, Dani Alves put the ball down to take a corner. Barcelona vs. Villarreal. The mercurial Brazilian took 3 steps back before an unexpected yellow projectile landed at his feet. The Barcelona defender continued, but his eyes fixated on the object. In an instant, he changed his mind. He walked up to it, picked it up, peeled the banana, and took a bite. The crowd cheered and applauded. He threw the fruit to the side and lobbed the ball into the penalty area. The game continued. However, the global condemnation of this racist action and the celebration of Alves's incredible calm gave hope that the war on racism was not over. In the aftermath, the Barcelona legend explained, "we aren't going to change things easily" (The Mercury News). Only a year earlier he had called the battle against racism a "lost war" (Ibid). The Footballing world was reminded that football was still in danger.

2 years ago, Aubameyang smashed home a penalty to put Arsenal ahead in the North London Derby. The game was immensely significant, with both clubs chasing a spot in the next year's prestigious Champions League and battling for local bragging rights. Tensions ran high, and with the Gabonese's first goal of the game, the Emirates Stadium exploded in ecstasy. This time, the image was of a player facing the opposition crowd, chest out, head held high (Lewis). A few meters ahead of him lay a curved yellow disgrace—a repetition of the past.

Over the last three decades, racism in football has seen tremendous decline. But regardless of where we are in this war, the result is the same. Barnes played in a world where racial abuse was accepted as part of the game, Dani Alves's career developed as racism

began to find its way back into football, and Aubameyang now scores on pitches where it takes 3-strikes of abuse before real action is taken.

Soccer has a long way to go.

### **Managers, Competition, and Injustice**

Sol Campbell, Steven Gerrard, Frank Lampard. Three World-Class leaders. Three of the best English players of their generation. At the turn of the 21st century, they were key players in the UK's biggest teams. Campbell controversially made the switch to Arsenal in 2001. During the team's golden age, he was their rock at the back and led them to 2 Premier League titles, 2 FA Cups, and a Champions League Final. Not to mention, what happened in 2003/2004, when Arsenal went undefeated for the whole league season, an incredible feat.

Gerrard became synonymous with Liverpool in the 2000s. The scouse box to box midfielder made his debut at 18, and by 23, he had already been named the club's captain. In a Liverpool side struggling to compete at the top, Gerrard remained an extremely loyal servant for 17 years. In the 2005 Champions League Final, as overwhelming underdogs and against all odds, he dragged Liverpool back from 3-0 down to 3-3, beating the great AC Milan team on penalties.

Lampard was a mainstay of a Chelsea team that revolutionized the modern game at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The energetic and powerful midfielder made his name with perfectly timed late runs into the box where his goal-scoring prowess came to the fore. During his magical 13 year career with the Blues, he became the highest-scoring midfielder in Premier League history, managing more than 150 goals. With only five years separating these icons, they followed similar paths with Campbell playing his final Premier League game in 2011, with the other two following suit four years later.

While Gerrard took on Scottish giants, Rangers, as his first managerial job, and Lampard took on the manager position at a Derby side near the summit of the Championship (England's second division) you would have to plunge down the leagues to find Sol Campbell's first opportunity; Macclesfield Town. The lowest-ranked team in the Football League, at the bottom of the 4th division (BBC).

Gary Neville, Diego Maradona, Tony Adams. Campbell might just be one of those great players who couldn't replicate the form they had on the field. But this issue goes far deeper than the ex-Arsenal man. "Do I think there's a glass ceiling for black coaches? Yes" (Lea). Former England international Emile Heskey is one of many who have finally started addressing this issue. Campbell, himself has strongly criticized the white dominance of English football management. In 2017, he even stated that he would be willing to start a job without a salary after barely being given an interview at numerous clubs (Nakrani).

"When I said that I was talking about the lack of black managers...people ask me do I want to do my coaching badges. Why? You're not given a chance, so no... It's a waste of time" (OneFootball). Danny Rose, current Tottenham left-back, is a prime example of the impact of football's ingrained racism. BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) managers now make up less than 7% of coaches in the Football League, whereas in the Premier League alone, 25% of the players are black or mixed race, and 14% of the British population have BAME backgrounds (Kelsey). There is such a rich diversity of players on the field, how can there be such a distinct juxtaposition off it?

Kuper and Szymanski's *Soccernomics* gives us the answer: 'The economic forces of competition rove white men to ditch their prejudices' (Kuper 105). In other words, football is too competitive and too ruthlessly transparent for discrimination. In the late 80s, soccer economist, Szymanski, proved that clubs that discriminate underperformed massively. As a result, there were revolutionary changes on the pitch. This seems to explain the exact opposite of the disgraceful stats I listed above. Why did competition end discrimination of players and not coaches? Kuper explains that the impact of the manager is far more ambiguous. Some soccer analysts even argue that the average manager is barely significant to a team's overall performance. The ambiguity means that the job of a manager is anything but transparent. Without transparency, it is near impossible to prove discrimination. While teams

who discriminate against black players clearly underperform, the lack of a manager's direct impact means the same can't be said about managers. While the English game has seen some legendary overachieving managers such as Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger, on average, the impact is not so clear. 'Inefficient markets can maintain discrimination almost indefinitely' explains Kuper, meaning that it is even harder to prove that black managers are undervalued given how difficult it is to measure a manager's performance (Ibid 113).

Thierry Henry at Monaco in 2018 and Zinedine Zidane at Real Madrid. Both generational talents, both French World Cup Winners, and both of African descent. These are two players who reached the pinnacle of football and, despite their inexperience, were given dream managerial jobs. While Zidane has proved an enormous success, Henry massively flopped. Zidane led Real Madrid to an unprecedented three Champions League trophies in a row; Henry was sacked three months into his Monaco job. The point is, both these managers were given a chance, despite their background. But sadly, they are exceptions to the rule.

2019 did see the introduction of the Rooney Rule in British football (Kelsey). The policy, inspired and copied from the NFL, forces clubs to interview at least one BAME candidate for first-team management positions. While this is definitely a step in the right direction, it has not been incorporated into the Premier League, England's first division. These changes need to happen at the top to have a real impact, and it is a massive disappointment that the League is apparently "pushing other initiatives" (Ibid).

In a sport where there is such a rich diversity on the field, it is more and more frustrating to see the exact opposite in management. Football is stuck in a mindset where if a black coach "fails as a manager, he fails as a black manager, not on an individual level" and where white managers can "lose a job and not be accountable to the white race" (Steinberg).

### **France, World Cups, and Discrimination**

A nation craving international success. French football fans had suffered deeply since watching their captain, Zidane, bury his head into Materazzi's chest on a famous night in Berlin. Their team went on to lose the 2006 World Cup Final against Italy on penalties. 12 years on and this suffering continued: in the 2008 European Championships France miserably finished bottom of their group, 2010 saw the team go on strike before crashing out, and in 2016 they lost the final of the Euros as overwhelming favourites against a mediocre Ronaldo-less Portuguese team.

By the time 2018 arrived the French were afraid to put any expectations on an extremely talented squad. However, this golden generation was so abundant they could have fielded three competitive teams in the tournament.

Mbappe; the world's best young player had exploded onto the footballing scene with a mix of world-class finishing, dribbling, and blistering speed. At only 19 years old, he glided past half the Argentinian team racing across the pitch with a combination of trickery and pure pace to dominate the quarter-finals of the World Cup. Kante; a back to back English league champion, reads the game like few others. Defensively, he has developed a rarely seen instinct. The Chelsea defensive midfielder knows where to be and when to be there. Pogba; a towering figure, bought by Manchester United for just shy of \$100 Million. His passing range, the elegance of his dribbling, and his power make him one of the world's most complete midfielders. At this World Cup, he proved this with a multitude of composed performances where his work rate in the middle of the park meant France's forwards could express themselves freely.

I watched in frustration as the French national team, led by these three, went on to beat Croatia in the final. Kante controlled the midfield covering every blade of grass on the pitch. Pogba launched attacks and controlled the rhythm of the game with his vision and

elegant touches of the ball. Mbappe proved to be untouchable again as he blasted a shot past the helpless Croatian keeper to wrap up the game at 4-1. In doing so he became the first teenager to score in a World Cup Final since the great Pelé.

20 years of impatience exploded out onto the streets of Europe. The French went absolutely crazy celebrating their win and a wave of blue took over France. Yet, in the aftermath, backward and unfounded murmurs of whether this team was really a representation of France began to re-emerge.

Although they were born in France, with Mbappe having Algerian and Cameroonian roots, Kante's parents immigrating from Mali, and Pogba's from Guinea, 'Les Bleus' have extremely diverse backgrounds. Almost 75% of the 23 man squad having African ancestors. Although this victory seemed like a perfect way to celebrate the diversity within France the underlying and often politically driven racism dampened these celebrations. A year earlier Marine Le Pen represented the Front National, a far-right French party, where she won 33% of the vote with her anti-immigration messages (Wikipedia). Social media was used as a platform to promote these disgraceful views, as some people began to sarcastically question if Africa had won the tournament.

20 years prior, France was wildly celebrating its first World Cup triumph. Their captain and leader, Laurent Blanc, gripped the iconic trophy as 70 years of impatience exploded out onto the streets of Europe. This victory seemed like a perfect way to celebrate diversity within France. Officials used this to proudly show the world the multi-cultural harmony that existed in France (Sire). Surely a victory like this would be a step in the right direction to a France more accepting of its diversity. However, much like today, that was overly optimistic. In *Soccernomics* Kuper explains the rise of "popular grumbling[s] about the number of non-white players" led by, non-other than, Jean-Marie Le Pen (Kuper 108). The former extreme-right leader is the father and predecessor of the aforementioned Marine

Le Pen. The author's cite a 1999 survey which stated that 31% of people agreed that there were too many foreigners in their French national team (Ibid). This was the depressing reality. A year earlier, these players had given the French nation a "moment of collective euphoria" comparable to the liberation of Paris in 1944 (Sire). Yet, they were still seen as outcasts.

By 2006 Jean-Marie Le Pen would publicly declare that the team did not represent the French nation (Galeano). And in 2011, minutes from the French Football Federation (FFF) were leaked. During the meeting, Blanc criticized the players coming through the French footballing system. He explained that they were "producing really only one type of player: big, strong, fast...and who are the big, strong players? The blacks" (Kuper 107). He went on to explain that there was a need to "introduce other parameters, adjusted to [their] own culture" (Ibid). This was the same Laurent Blanc who had been vital to the 1998 winning team, playing alongside players from a multitude of backgrounds. The same Blanc who was the manager of the French national team. Although he explained he was purely "talking about soccer qualities, not color" it clearly shows the want for less diversity by some members of the FFF (Ibid).

The shocking juxtaposition between the value of diversity on the pitch and lack of acceptance off it is hard to explain. Part of the French 1998 team, Thuram explained that when the "team won, it was a win for France, and when they lost, it was 'there are too many blacks in the French team'" (Sire). It would be no surprise to uncover the minutes of another secret meeting in 10 years' time discussing the need to limit the number of blacks going through footballing academies.

### **BLM, The Future of Football, and Hope**

Watching all 22 players and the 4 match officials take a knee before every game has made me proud. Some raise their fists defiantly in the air, others stare at the ground in thought, and for a brief moment, we acknowledge the damning changes that need to be made. The English Premier League's recent public support of the Black Lives Matter movement is a ray of hope in soccer's battle against racism. We will only see the real impact in the next couple of years, as fans are allowed back into stadiums in the post-pandemic period. But for now, despite the 'White Lives Matter' banner that was flown over the Etihad Stadium during a Manchester City vs Burnley game, I am optimistic. The league's support of BLM is a sign that the pinnacle of English football is ready to lead the entire country.

Despite my optimism, the issues continue to be prominent around the world. Just because racism is finally being properly addressed in British soccer doesn't mean the fight against extremism is anywhere close to coming to an end. As long as politicians continue to amass support using racial demagoguery (see Donald Trump), our societies will always struggle to put down xenophobia.

Over 3 billion viewers watched Russia's 2018 World Cup, almost half of Earth's population (FIFA). Evidently, there is nothing that has as strong a hold on mankind. It is time for football around the world to lead the fight to end racial discrimination. If players, coaches, teams, leagues, and organizations create a no tolerance environment, people would be forced to listen.

Football is emotional. Tensions will always run high. But there is no room for racism.

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