

Collective Billionaires: The Battle Between Fans and Owners For Control of the English Premier
League



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“There will be tears.” Few phrases can come close to defining the pure passion fans have for soccer, but famed commentator Martin Tyler’s statement perfectly encapsulated how many Manchester City fans felt on the final day of the 2011/12 Premier League season (“93:20”). There would be tears; the question was whether they would be tears of joy or of sorrow. The two teams from Manchester (City and United) were level on points after thirty-seven games, but Manchester City held the tiebreaker as the team had a superior goal difference (Matchett). If Manchester City won against a weak Queens Park Rangers side, the team would not only be crowned Premier League champions for the first time in the club’s history, but also it would defeat archrivals Manchester United who had been the dominant Mancunian team for so long.

A more dramatic finish could not have been dreamed of, yet disaster seemed to strike when Manchester United’s match against Sunderland concluded with a United victory. The result of that game would not matter if City won; however, the team wearing Sky Blue trailed to Queens Park Rangers with only a few minutes remaining in the game, and many fans feared their team would once again fail to perform when it mattered most. At this point, with only a few minutes remaining, there were tears; the fans who had come expecting a celebration believed they had become part of another humiliation at the hands of their oldest nemesis, many of them left the stadium. It was at this moment of catastrophic devastation that a glimmer of hope appeared from the head of Edin Džeko as he leveled the game with four minutes remaining. Manchester City was given life, and then the miracle occurred. Commentator Martin Tyler laid out the scene: “It’s finished at Sunderland. Manchester United have done all they can,” but now it was City’s turn to do all it could. The ball found its way to the feet of City’s Argentine talisman, and Tyler uttered words that would be cemented in the minds of every Premier League soccer fan forever: “Manchester City are still alive here, Balotelli, Aguero! Yes! I swear you’ll

never see anything like this ever again, so watch it, drink it in...Two goals in added time for Manchester City to snatch the title away from Manchester United. Stupendous!” It was a moment of pure euphoria as Tyler drew out the last syllable of Sergio Aguero’s name when the ball crossed over the goal line. Manchester City had won the game and the Premier League title with less than a minute remaining, and the fans were weeping tears of joy (“93:20”).



Manchester City celebrating their Premier League victory.

Many fans and pundits will cite Manchester City’s victory over Manchester United as the greatest moment in English Premier League history, and it is almost impossible to argue against that view from a perspective of entertainment and competition. Competition is the one thing fans of the Premier League take pride in over anything else; it is the aspect of England’s domestic league that they believe sets it apart from others across Europe (Spacey). Over the past few decades of domestic league competition in England, there have been other seasons where the title was not decided until the final matchday, but Manchester City’s triumph is the only time that the league has been decided in the very last minute of play (Clarke). It would seem like fans in England would all celebrate the 2011/12 season as the greatest of all time; however, while many

fondly remember Martin Tyler's famous commentary, there are some who resent the title victory for what it stands for: the influence of money in the Premier League and in soccer as a whole. A sportswriter named Stefan Symanski summarized this feeling just days after Manchester City celebrated its victory: "Manchester City will not be popular champions with many because ultimately they bought the title." That accusation served as a heavy indictment of the champions because what it really meant was that they were circumventing competition, not creating it.

The source of Symanski's harsh criticism of Manchester City was the fact that the club had really only found success because Sheikh Mansour, a wealthy foreigner, had acquired Manchester City in 2008 and spent millions in order to improve the team (Robinson and Clegg 318-319). Mansour was not the first, and he would not be the last foreign billionaire to invest in a Premier League team, and the criticism of him is exactly the same as that of the other owners: that they are paying to win trophies instead of truly earning them. However, the source of billionaire owners is the very fans that deride them so much. Without fans collectively spending astronomical amounts of money to enjoy soccer, there would be no Sheikh Mansour in Manchester City.

Money influences everything, and soccer is no exception, and there has always been an unbalanced power dynamic and caste system in the Premier League based on which teams have money and which teams do not. Owing to the nature of the sport, there are few ways for teams to rise from their place in the caste system without extreme luck, but the advent of billionaire owners willing to spend millions of pounds out of their own pockets to improve a team is one way which they can. It is by no means a perfect solution; in fact, it is not a solution at all, but to blame individual billionaire owners for the problems with a system that can only exist because the fans fund it is simply missing the bigger picture.

The Premier League Case Study

Many sports are visually impressive, and fans of any sport would argue that their favorite is somehow the best. However, soccer has succeeded in becoming the most popular, as an estimated 3.5 billion people worldwide enjoy the sport (Sourav). While an argument can be made that soccer is inherently superior to every other sport, that is only an opinion, a very biased opinion. Fans will cite “the beauty of the goals scored...the artistry of the build-up play, the final pass, the link-up of players combining together to put it in the back of the net,” and many other facets of gameplay that make soccer so watchable (“Explained”). However, every sport has its own beauty, and soccer’s popularity has arisen mostly from how old it is.

In England, soccer dates back hundreds of years, and formal clubs were established as early as 1863. British colonists spread the sport throughout the world, and every place England came in contact with soon adopted the sport (Nagel). As a result, there are now two hundred and three teams that are members of F.I.F.A. (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), which is more than the number of countries in the United Nations (Fitzgerald). This makes soccer the most international sport in the world, and its widespread popularity has led to the establishment of hundreds of different leagues that showcase the sport.

Unlike many other sports, the majority of soccer competitions take place in a league format. This format entails each team playing every other team twice throughout the season, once at home and once away. A team is given three points for a win, one for a tie, and none for a loss, and the team with the most points at the end of the season is crowned champion (“Premier League Explained”). There are no playoffs, so a team cannot become champion because of a couple of lucky wins but must instead display consistency over the course of the entire season.

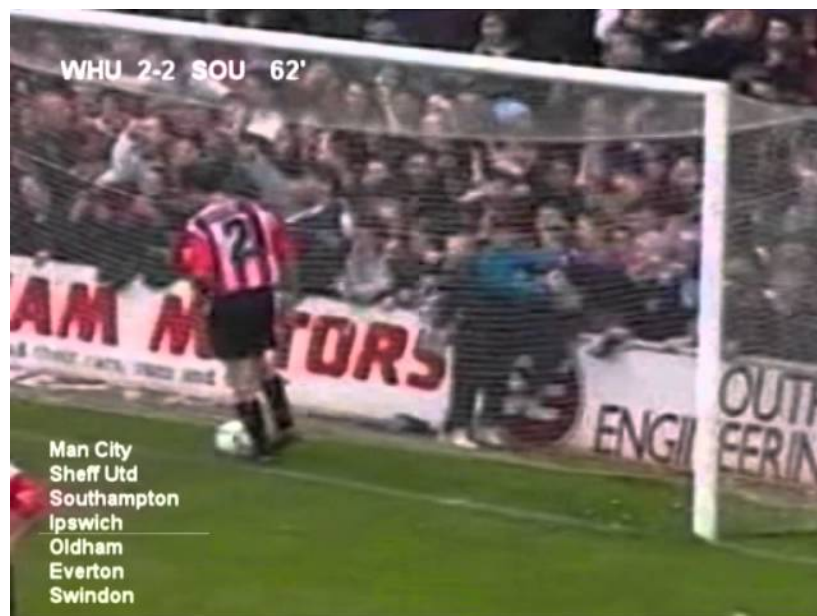
This means the team that ultimately wins is actually the best in the league during that given season.

Generally, five leagues are considered the best in the world: the English Premier League, the Italian Serie A, the German Bundesliga, the French Ligue 1, and the Spanish LaLiga. Of these four, the Premier League is often considered the most competitive, and therefore the most watchable. This is due to the presence of the “Big Six,” the colloquial name given to the top teams in the league: Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Tottenham Hotspur, and Manchester United. The heightened competition provided by the “Big Six” is demonstrated by the fact that five teams have won the Premier League over the past ten years. In comparison, only three have won Serie A and LaLiga, and two have won the Bundesliga during that same period. Five have also won Ligue 1, but only two have won in the past five years, while four have won in the past five in the Premier League (Chaudhary). The development of the “Big Six” is relatively recent, as Chelsea and Manchester City only became competitive after financial takeovers from foreign investors. Before these takeovers, the competition in the Premier League was comparable to that of the other top leagues. However, despite the takeovers being directly responsible for this increase in competition, they have become the center of great controversy.

The English Premier League was founded on February 20, 1992, and the most impactful decision made by its founders was which television company would broadcast the games. This decision is explained in depth by Joshua Robinson and Jonathan Clegg in their extensive history of the league: *The Club: How the English Premier League Became the Wildest, Richest, Most Disruptive Force in Sports*. Two offers were made to the owners of the twenty-two Premier League clubs: one from ITV and one from Sky and, “the vote went 14-6, with two clubs deciding to abstain from the biggest business decision in the modern history of English soccer.” Sky had

offered much more money: £44.5 million a year compared to £32.5 million from ITV, making the decision relatively easy from a financial standpoint (41). However, while the deal was chosen for monetary reasons, its most significant benefit came from a desperate decision made by Sky.

There was a lot of pressure placed on Sky to return on its investment, as the company had been “previously running at a loss.” A return on investment would come through people paying to watch soccer, so Sky chose to make the games cinematically entertaining. The broadcasters accomplished this by having “the camera angles close to the pitch, the crowd microphones provide a proper atmosphere, [and] the stands generally near capacity,” and that innovation “has given it an advantage over rival European leagues” (Cox). In contrast, television broadcasts across Europe had high camera angles and did not show the score on the screen; another feature Sky added which was controversial with the fans in England at the time; a controversy that Robinson and Clegg attribute to “the British aversion to any sort of change” (42). However, this minor technical change has become a part of every soccer broadcast, and Sky’s risky attempts to make soccer entertaining to a television audience paid off for itself and the Premier League.



Sky Sports broadcast from 1994 showing the score on screen.

Sky's success increased the Premier League's popularity in England. When the time came to renegotiate the broadcasting deal in 2003, the Premier League's chief executive Richard Scudamore, who had taken the position in 1999, saw the potential for expansion overseas. Sky was only responsible for broadcasts in the United Kingdom, and the television rights for overseas broadcasters had previously been sold to two companies in 2001: IMG and Canal+ for £178 million. Scudamore believed, "the club owners...stood a better chance of finally raking in what they were worth by breaking up overseas rights into separate territorial packages," and this proved to be true. In 2004, the Premier League struck a new deal with Sky for £670 million to keep its exclusivity in the United Kingdom for four more years, and that same year sold the overseas rights for £325 million; a fee that was collectively paid out by broadcasters all over the world. As more and more international attention was given to England's top flight of soccer, the price of the overseas rights continued to rise until it reached £1.4 billion in the most recent deal in 2010 (Robinson and Clegg 225). While clearly, this rise in price is mostly the responsibility of those overseas broadcasters, the Premier League would never have been able to market itself so well had Sky been unsuccessful in its original attempts to draw in an audience of fans.

Competition Before Foreign Investment: The Caste System's Foundation

Sky's innovations were undoubtedly one of the most important factors in the Premier League's rise to global popularity, but changing camera angles and pumping in crowd noise would be useless if the games themselves were boring. Looking back at the results of the first few seasons of the Premier League, the foundations of a caste system are apparent, as Manchester United sat comfortably at the top, being crowned champions four of the first five seasons, with Blackburn Rovers sneaking in as an anomaly in 1995. During this time, Manchester United simply had the mentality to outlast the onslaught from the other teams

challenging to win the Premier League title. However, while Manchester United won the majority of these battles for supremacy, the fights were not entirely lopsided. Teams such as Newcastle United, Arsenal, and Aston Villa sat in the second tier of the caste system and ensured the champions never won by more than ten points (“Seasons”). These teams succeeded in slowing down Manchester United, but the level of competition they provided is hardly comparable to the future competition that would stem from Chelsea and Manchester City’s wealthy owners.

The key figure who ensured Manchester United’s will remained unbroken during the early stages of the Premier League was its manager Alex Ferguson, who led the team to be crowned champions of the Premier League thirteen times over the course of his career (Robinson and Clegg 320). Examples of his leadership are manifold, but one thing was certain: he was willing to do anything for Manchester United. Ferguson is the primary reason why the club did so well during those first five years, with the greatest example of this shown in the 1995-96 season. During this season, another team was in first place for much of the campaign and threatened the growing dynasty of Manchester United. Newcastle United, led by its manager Kevin Keegan, was challenging Ferguson, so he employed mind games that would become characteristic of his time as a manager. He openly criticized Keegan and his team in a press conference, and this sent the Newcastle United manager “into an on-air meltdown,” that preceded the collapse of the team’s title challenge and saw Manchester United crowned champions at the end of the season (Robinson and Clegg 57). It seemed like no other English team would be able to break the caste system dominated by Manchester United and Ferguson, but in 1997 a Frenchman named Arsene Wenger arrived in North London and began one of the greatest rivalries in the history of the Premier League.



Manchester United players celebrate their 1996/97 title win of the Premier League.

If Alex Ferguson is the best manager in Premier League history, then Arsene Wenger is the most influential. Wenger is responsible for both a tactical and a physical revolution that occurred over his first few seasons as Arsenal's manager. Wenger, dubbed "the Professor," became one of the first foreign managers in England when he was given the job at Arsenal in 1996, and he immediately began making changes. Arsenal, like the other English teams prior to Wenger's arrival, had a serious drinking culture, "an environment best understood by the title of the then captain's autobiography. Former central defender Tony Adams called his memoir *Addicted*" (Gowers). Wenger ended this culture and "introduced proper dietary practices...and ordered stretching sessions that were considered bizarre at the time." These changes helped keep his best players healthy and extended their careers (Cox). The French manager changed his team's tactics so that they played "aesthetically" (Robinson and Clegg 321). He was able to bring in players from the previously "unexplored French Market," as he introduced some of the first majorly influential players who were not British. The likes of Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira, Emmanuel Petit, and Robert Pires dominated Arsenal's attacking lineup, and their previously

unseen flair terrorized opposing teams (Cummings). Arsene Wenger's Arsenal was the first team that actually scared Alex Ferguson and threatened his control of the caste system. Arsenal's introduction of a foreign manager and foreign players would serve as a precursor for the foreign owners who would soon follow, but before that happened, a period arose where Arsenal and Manchester United dueled for the league.

Arsene Wenger was immediately successful as he won the Premier League in his first season as Arsenal's manager, but this only led to Manchester United's greatest ever achievement: when the team won the "treble" in 1999. The "treble" refers to a team winning the Premier League, the F.A. (Football Association) Cup, and the U.E.F.A. (Union of European Football Associations) Champions League in the same season. Every team in England's top leagues gets a chance to play in the F.A. Cup, which is a tournament of one-off knockout games, while the Champions' League is comprised of the top teams from the best European leagues (the top four teams in the Premier League win Champions League qualification for the next season) ("Seasons"). Just winning one of these three trophies is impressive, but winning all three in one season happens rarely.



Arsenal players celebrate their "Invincible" 2003/04 Premier League Season.

In 2004, only a few years after Manchester United's triumph, Arsenal completed its greatest ever achievement, when the team became the first and only to win the Premier League without losing a single game. They were given the nickname the "Invincibles," and their unbeaten streak continued on into the next season. Arsenal had not lost for forty-nine consecutive Premier League games when they faced Manchester United in a game that would be dubbed the "Battle of the Buffet." Ferguson wanted nothing more than to win and to prevent Arsenal from extending its unbeaten run to fifty games. Manchester United won 2-0, and the game was given its name after tensions boiled over and an Arsenal player threw a pizza at Alex Ferguson in the locker room (Robinson and Clegg 278). Despite Manchester United's dramatic victory, it would not go on to win the Premier League in that 2004/05 season, and neither would Arsenal. Unfortunately, the "Battle of the Buffet" would be the end of Arsenal and Manchester United's dual reign over the Premier League that had lasted for seven years, wherein the teams won three and four titles respectively ("Seasons"). Times were changing, and a new team, backed by Russian money, would take the Premier League by storm and threaten to reshape the caste system entirely.



Arsene Wenger (left) and Alex Ferguson (right) appear on the cover of a BBC article about the "Battle of the Buffet."

Russian Investment at Chelsea: the First Foreign Investor Arrives

The English Premier League cemented its place as the world's favorite league during the period between 1992 and 2004, and this drew some powerful fans. Sky's innovations that had led to the Premier League's success worldwide allowed for a Russian oligarch to become a fan. This fan would watch as Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger dueled for the league title, and eventually, he would not be content with only being able to view his favorite sport on television (Igel). This man was Roman Abramovich, a wealthy Russian businessman who purchased Chelsea Football Club for £140 million in 2003 (Robinson and Clegg 93). Prior to his purchase of the club, Chelsea had slowly been becoming title contenders, as the team had already signed club legends like Gianfranco Zola and John Terry, who had pushed the team all the way to fourth place. In fact, the story goes that had Chelsea lost their final game of the 2002/03 season to Liverpool and failed to qualify for the Champions League, Abramovich would not have purchased the team (Cole). However, fourth place was not good enough for a man who had just invested £140 million, and between 2003 and 2004, Abramovich proceeded to pour millions of pounds into the team, a trend he continues today (Rostance).



Roman Abramovich attending a Chelsea match adorned in a club scarf.

The deep pockets of Roman Abramovich ushered in a new era in the Premier League, where three teams dominated instead of two. The Russian's money enticed a young manager named Jose Mourinho to join the club. Mourinho totally changed the team, and his access to Abramovich's money allowed him to bring some of the world's best players: Petr Cech, Didier Drogba, Ricardo Carvalho, and Arjen Robben, all joined in the summer of 2004. With his new superstar players, Mourinho proceeded to tear apart the Premier League, defeating both Arsenal and Manchester United en route to a then-record ninety-five point title win. Chelsea repeated as champions in the 2005/06 season, and Jose Mourinho declared himself "the 'Special One,'" due to his accomplishments. Despite this, Chelsea's first experience with the Portuguese man came to a surprise end in 2007 when he left the club and joined the Italian team Inter Milan (Rostance). However, Mourinho, and more importantly, Abramovich's impact on the league would be felt for years.



Chelsea players celebrate their 2004/05 title victory with Jose Mourinho.

The 2006/07 season saw Manchester United regain its status as the dominant force in the league, but the Jose Mourinho experience had awakened many to a harsh reality: "Money buys success" (Symanski). This realization among many fans created a hatred for Roman Abramovich

and his wallet. The previous champions of England had all been storied clubs that had developed their players and operated within their means, but Chelsea did not have the title-winning pedigrees of Manchester United and Arsenal. In the caste system of English soccer the good teams stay good, the decent teams challenge each other, and the rest are just happy to be playing against the good teams. The traditional English fans who had been annoyed by Sky's decision to show the score on screen during games were now enraged at the idea that mediocre teams could become champions with just a simple injection of money. This rage is encapsulated in an article written by Tom McLarnon in 2008 where the journalist states: "More money means more problems, and problems that are now increasingly solved by money." The English fans struggled to come to terms with Abramovich, but their anger did not stop the trend he started.

A Troubling Trend: Another Foreign Investors Arrives

Interestingly enough, when Tom McLarnon said that money would result in more problems, he was not speaking about Roman Abramovich and Chelsea. His article, published by Bleacher Report in 2008, was titled "Manchester City Takeover Suggests Dark Days Ahead For Premier League." He wrote the article in response to Sheikh Mansour's acquisition of Manchester City through the Abu Dhabi United Group earlier that year. However, unlike Chelsea, Manchester City were not title contenders prior to Sheikh Mansour's investment into the team. As recently as 2002, they were in the Championship, the tier below the Premier League in English soccer ("Tales"). At the conclusion of each season, the three teams with the lowest amount of points are relegated out of the Premier League into the Championship, and the best three teams from the lower division are promoted into the Premier League ("How Does"). In 2002 Manchester City won promotion on their own merit, but nobody would have envisioned the team's future success.

The revolution that took place in Manchester City was somewhat more controversial than the one that occurred at Chelsea earlier in the decade. Fans all over the world expressed their negative opinion of Sheikh Mansour and his investment, as evidenced by McLarnon's article. Since 2008, Manchester City has won the Premier League four times, and the first triumph in 2012 was met with condemnation instead of praise: "Manchester City will not be popular champions with many, because ultimately they bought the title" (Symanski). Since the year 2000, only one team has spent more than the £1.79 Billion that Manchester City has spent on player acquisition, and that team is Chelsea ("Highest"). However, money did not start to flow from Sheikh Mansour until 2008, and Manchester City will likely pass Chelsea's spending in the future.

Many of the attacks leveled against Mansour probably spawn from jealousy, but there is something more complex about the anger that English fans feel for Abramovich and the Sheikh. It all comes back to the "British aversion to any sort of change" that Robinson and Clegg mentioned in *The Club*. Fans of the sport know that money is a part of the game, but they believe the sport's integrity is damaged when teams pay for success instead of earning it. That is what leads to criticisms like the one issued by Stefan Symanski, who said that Manchester city had "bought the title." Another critical piece of soccer's integrity comes from the fact that it is a game, not a business. When Sheikh Mansour first came to a Manchester City game, it was two years after he had purchased the team. The experience did not give fans a good impression of the foreign owner: "He waved to the fans from his seat in the directors' box ... appeared to enjoy himself, and never went to another game again. The club's official position is that he doesn't care for the hassle. Critics argue that he doesn't care at all" (146). Like all sports, soccer is a game of

passion, and the Sheikh's actions did not convey a love of the game that would justify his takeover to the fans.



Sheikh Mansour waves to Manchester City fans at the first game he attended in person.

While traditional English fans can argue that money has caused nothing but problems in the Premier League and that Chelsea and Manchester City have bought their success, there is a reason that money is so pervasive in the sport. Soccer is simply one of the most entertaining enterprises on the planet: “The beauty of the game itself and the way it captivates an audience is what makes it so special. Without the game, there would be no money to be made” (Lue et al.). Sheikh Mansour's lack of presence and the secrecy that seems to surround him and Roman Abramovich may convince some that they do not love the sport, but the reason they invested in soccer, and more specifically, the Premier League, is because they are fans. Eugene Tenenbaum, a member of Chelsea's Board of Directors and a close associate of Abramovich, attributed the Russian's love of the sport to its unpredictability: “I think the reason why he loves football after all of these years is that it's not a formula. It's not an algorithm. I think that is why people love it and why it is the number one sport in the world” (Igel). No matter how controversial Roman

Abramovich's spending is among fans, the reason he does it is the same as the reason why they watch: love of the game.

More Foreign Owners

Having seen how poorly fans have reacted to Chelsea and Manchester City's foreign owners, it may be surprising to realize that every team in the "Big Six" has had a financial takeover in the past twenty years. In fact, all of those teams' owners are foreign except for Joe Lewis at Tottenham Hotspur. In 2001 Lewis acquired the club, but he has not injected billions into the team like his fellow owners. While the "Big Six" sit in their own tier of the Premier League's caste system, they are not all equal, and Tottenham Hotspur is undoubtedly the least successful, as the team has not won a trophy in three decades. Many directly blame the club's chairman Daniel Levy, a business partner of Joe Lewis, and claim "his caution in the transfer market could have held Spurs back from taking that final step needed to win trophies" (Kidd). However, this criticism of Levy is opposite to those of Abramovich and Mansour, and if Tottenham ever wins a title, nobody will be able to say that he bought it.

Another owner who faces similar criticism to Lewis and Levy is Arsenal's Stan Kroenke, who purchased the club recently in 2018. Unlike Levy, Kroenke is American, and that has drawn suspicion from fans. His time has been very limited, but his investments into the team are not anywhere near to those of Manchester City and Chelsea. Fans have been disappointed in his excuses that the club does not have enough money to spend like its rivals, which is a key indicator to show how far the Premier League has come since Arsenal last won the League in 2004. The demands of fans to spend so that the club can compete, show that they are beginning to accept Chelsea and Manchester City's accomplishments. However, further criticism of Kroenke also goes to show that they have not truly accepted foreign ownership: "Fans might

learn about key financial decisions long after they had happened. All of this adds to concerns that the club's dealings will be opaque, a feeling compounded by the fact KSE is based in Delaware, the U.S. state notorious for financial secrecy" (R. Davies). Kroenke embodies both Lewis and Abramovich's negatives, as he does not spend enough money to challenge for titles but is still a secretive foreign owner.

The final two owners of the "Big Six" teams are also Americans. John Henry took over Liverpool in 2010 (Siu), and Malcolm Glazer acquired Manchester United in 2005. When Malcolm Glazer died in 2014, ownership of the team passed on to his six children, who have run the team since then with the help of executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward (France). Henry and the Glazers were in similar positions as they took control of two of the most renowned teams in England, but their receptions have been entirely different. Henry has sustained a better image among Liverpool fans because he has been much more transparent than his American compatriots. He made a great effort to gather input from fans when he first acquired the club as he "met with a supporter's group to listen to their concerns and suggestions," and after those meetings, "Liverpool announced the launch of an Official Supporters' Committee" (Siu). Henry's willingness to serve the fans has allowed him to stave off criticism until the team finally won the Premier League in 2020.

Unfortunately, the Glazers have not been as successful in winning over the fans, as "The Manchester United Supporters' Trust has been looking to return ownership of the club to supporters in 2005, and came close in 2010" (France). The fans at Manchester United could not be more displeased with how the Glazers and Woodward have run the club, and one of the largest contributing factors has been their incurrence of massive debt. Since the Glazers took over, the club's debt has increased by £500 million, and this investment has not been met with the success

that fans of England's most successful team are used to (France). Despite the many criticisms that Henry, the Glazers, and Kroenke face, Abramovich and Sheikh Mansour face more, and the key difference is their level of success. Arsenal and Manchester United's success has significantly decreased since Kroenke and the Glazers acquired the clubs. Tottenham has won nothing under Joe Lewis despite pushing towards it. Liverpool has found some success under Henry, but since 2010 Manchester City and Chelsea have won the Premier League a combined seven times ("Seasons"). English fans will always be suspicious of foreign owners, but Abramovich and Mansour's disrupting of the Premier League's traditional caste system has caused more intense scrutiny to fall on them.



The "Big Six" owners: top right to left: Stan Kroenke, Roman Abramovich, Daniel Levy; bottom right to left: Sheikh Mansour, Avram Glazer, and John Henry.

Financial Fair Play

_____ Soccer is a game defined by integrity, which seems to be the main reason why fans and pundits reacted so negatively to the financial takeovers of Roman Abramovich and Sheikh Mansour. The two foreign owners spent billions of pounds, and their teams won trophies as a result of their expenditure. However, while the cries of fans and members of the media, such as Kevin Symanski, saying they "bought the title" may feel legitimate, those criticisms ultimately mean nothing. However, there are people and organizations whose criticisms actually have an

impact, and in 2011 a very powerful man issued a condemnation that carried consequences with it. Michel Platini, one of the greatest European players of his generation and the now-disgraced former U.E.F.A. president, introduced new regulations called Financial Fair Play to stop the spending of Abramovich and the Sheikh. He called the actions of the two men “financial doping,” a fair assessment considering how great the advantage was that the foreign money had given Chelsea and Manchester City (Montague 217). The new rules were a direct response to Chelsea and Manchester City, as U.E.F.A. demonstrated that it would at least attempt to defend the game’s integrity.



Michel Platini discussing FFP at a press conference a few years after the rules were put into effect.

Financial Fairplay (often abbreviated to FFP) only affects teams competing in the two U.E.F.A. competitions: the Champions League and the Europa League. Teams from the top leagues around Europe can qualify for these competitions depending on how well they do in their domestic league the previous season. For example, the top four teams in the English Premier League receive automatic Champions League qualification, while fifth and sixth place receive Europa League qualification, and the seventh-placed team can qualify through a series of play-in games. The goal of these competitions is to have the top clubs from around Europe competing with each other in a knockout-style tournament that ends with the best team winning. Since the

level of competition is so high, the Champions League is often considered the most prestigious trophy in European club soccer (Kruskic). Since participation in the Champions League is synonymous with Premier League success, the restrictions put in place by Platini and U.E.F.A. directly impacted the aspirations of Roman Abramovich and Sheikh Mansour who undoubtedly wanted to experience European glory.

The goal of U.E.F.A.'s new FFP restrictions was simple: "prevent clubs that qualify for its competitions from spending beyond their means." The stance U.E.F.A. was taking was not just that foreign spending was wrong, but that it was unsustainable, and clubs that spent millions of pounds just to win trophies would eventually be plunged into debt. The main rule that U.E.F.A. put in place was that clubs could run at a loss of £35 million from 2011 to 2015, a number which dropped to £25.5 million for 2016, and further decreased through 2018. The goal was to have clubs eventually run even in their expenditure and income. Other rules also define what expenditures and what income count toward FFP: "Clubs need to balance ... transfers and wages - with television and ticket income, plus revenues raised by their commercial departments. Money spent on stadiums, training facilities, youth development, or community projects is exempt" ("Financial"). The reasoning behind these exemptions is to encourage the cultivation of homegrown talent and to discourage reckless spending that would incur debt.

U.E.F.A.'s restrictions were joined by the Premier League cost control rules in 2012, which introduced rules that were less severe than U.E.F.A.'s but applied to all Premier League teams. The Premier League's new rules stated that teams could not make losses of £105 million over a period of three years and that wages could not increase by over £7 million each year (Geey 110). With these new restrictions, one might think that Roman Abramovich and Sheikh

Mansour would be prevented from spending so much, but that would depend on how harshly U.E.F.A. and the Premier League enforced the rules.

Criticism of the Rules

U.E.F.A. may think that its punishments for breaches of FFP have been severe, but in truth, they have not been equal in every case. In his book *Done Deal: An Insider's Guide to Football Contracts, Multi-Million Pound Transfers and Premier League Big Business*, Daniel Geey chronicles some of the punishments doled out by U.E.F.A., and the trend appears to be that smaller European teams receive harsh punishments, while the larger clubs, such as Manchester City and Chelsea, are treated much more kindly. The department of U.E.F.A. responsible for monitoring teams' compliance with the FFP rules is called the Club Financial Control Body or CFCB, and the punishments it can issue range from fines to bans on teams playing in U.E.F.A. competitions. In 2015, a Russian team called Dynamo Moscow was investigated by the CFCB for taking a loss of over £220 million over the first three-year period set out by the FFP rules. This breach of the rules led to a ban that saw Dynamo Moscow miss the 2015/16 Europa League competition (Geey 111).

Similar to Dynamo Moscow, Manchester City was judged to be in violation of FFP in 2014 for running at a significant loss. The exact amount is unclear, but Manchester City had posted a loss of £197 million in 2011, the year that FFP was instituted, so it is reasonable to assume the team did not find a way to reverse that debt by 2014. The CFCB initially issued a fine of £26 million along with a two-year ban from U.E.F.A. competitions. However, Manchester City appealed the decision to the Court of Arbitration of Sport and, after twenty months of legal fighting, the ban was repealed, and the fine was lowered to £8.7 million (Randles). £8.7 million is not a substantial fee for a team with the financial backing of Manchester City. If the only

penalty for disregarding U.E.F.A.'s rules is a nominal fee, why should Manchester City follow the FFP rules? This question is one that Manchester City will answer, but the better question is why did U.E.F.A. create regulations to make the game fair if they do not enforce them justly?



The Court of Arbitration for Sport located in Lausanne, Switzerland, where Manchester City's ban was overturned.

U.E.F.A.'s FFP rules seemed to have good intentions when Michel Platini and his associates conceived them. After all, what could make the game fairer than ensuring teams only spent within their means? However, the rules' application has raised criticism, criticism that has followed the rules ever since they were introduced. In 2013, roughly two years after the rules were introduced and long before Manchester City would prove their impotence, Bleacher Report published an article by Ryan Bailey in which he called the rules "a bad idea." Among many criticisms, Bailey identifies a key one: "they will help keep the power within the richest clubs." Soccer has a caste system within which there is very little lasting mobility. Every so often, a team will over-perform for a season, but that success is almost always met with disappointment the following year.

U.E.F.A.'s rules all but ensure that no small teams will be able to compete for a meaningful prize, as their only attainable reward is the privilege of playing against the best teams in their country. Teams like Everton and West Ham United have won no trophies for finishing

seventh in a six-horse race in the Premier League (“Seasons”). FFP requires that teams do not spend more on player acquisition than they make from sponsorships, ticket sales, and other sources of income (“Financial”). However, the bigger teams have more sponsorships, more fans, and sell more merchandise, meaning they will always have more money to spend. Had Roman Abramovich or Sheikh Mansour not spent the millions of pounds that they have, the Premier League’s “Big Six” would just contain Arsenal, Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur, and Liverpool. Roman Abramovich and Sheikh Mansour have improved the Premier League, and while some “may question their methods ... the sudden rise of clubs like these has certainly made European football a more exciting—and unpredictable—place” (Bailey). The method that Chelsea and Manchester City have followed to achieve success may not be pretty, but it is one that other teams could follow to break the caste system and escape from mediocrity. The purpose of a sport is not to simply play against the best teams in the world but to be the best team in the world.

The Leicester City Exception

_____The success of Chelsea and Manchester City after investment seems to suggest that the only path to Premier League success comes through investment but, while this may be the case, there is one team that has defied the odds and won the Premier League without running at a comparable deficit. Leicester City was the Premier League champion in the 2015/16 season; an accomplishment heralded as a “fairytale” by many who watched it unfold. The previous season, Leicester City was almost relegated as they spent most of the season in twentieth place, only achieving safety over the last few weeks of the season with several invaluable wins (Grez). The odds that the team would win the league after such a disastrous campaign were set at 5000-1, the longest odds any team has overcome in sports history (Carr). However, Leicester City’s fortunes

did not change because a wealthy foreign owner decided to buy them between seasons but was either the product of the most intelligent decisions made by a club in Premier League history or simple luck.

Winning the league was a team effort, but three players stood out more than the rest: N’Golo Kante, Jamie Vardy, and Riyad Mahrez. These three players carried the team when it needed them most, and in direct contrast with Chelsea and Manchester City, the three players cost less than £10 million combined (Grez). Of those three players, Jamie Vardy best characterized the team’s attitude throughout the season. The charismatic English forward played with aggression and pace, a combination of attributes that would see him break the record for scoring in the most consecutive games in Premier League history (eleven) when Leicester defeated Manchester United (McMahon). The team was endearing to fans all across the world who wondered if a team without the financial backing of the “Big Six” could win the league. Fans enjoyed the team’s play and ridiculous stories like how Claudio Ranieri, the team’s manager, had motivated them to win by offering them pizza if they did not concede any goals in their game against Crystal Palace. The team won 1-0, and pictures of the team making pizza circulated (Grez). The fans reveled in the breath of fresh air, and the players grew in their confidence.

Leicester City’s victory did not come simply from pizza and charisma but from the shortcomings of the “Big Six” in the 2015/16 season. Arsenal and Tottenham were the only traditional teams in the running for the title, but their constant inexplicable mistakes and inability to gather any momentum saw them fall short (Grez). Leicester City only lost three times but still finished with only eighty-one points, one of the lowest totals for champions in Premier League history (“Seasons”). The team’s victory demonstrated that it was not impossible for a team to

naturally rise from the depths of the Premier League caste system, but the 5000-1 odds they faced are the same odds every other “small” team faces when trying to accomplish the same thing. What Leicester City achieved was as close to impossible as possible. There will be few seasons where every team in the “Big Six” lacks the motivation and teamwork necessary to challenge a team like Leicester City, and there will be fewer seasons that go as perfectly. With each season that passes, with Chelsea and Manchester City winning the Premier League, Leicester City’s impossible victory will be seen as just that: impossible.



Leicester City players celebrating their Premier League title victory in the 2015/16 season.

Leicester City’s Failed Title Defense: The Definition of the Caste System

_____ Leicester City’s title win could have ushered in a new era of play in the Premier League, but unfortunately, the Premier League’s natural order would soon be restored. Leicester City’s title defense in the 2016/17 season was one of the weakest in Premier League history. The reigning champions finished in twelfth place on 44 points, 37 points fewer than the previous year. Chelsea won the title with a tally of 93 points, 49 points better than Leicester, who were only ten points better than Hull City, the unfortunate third team to be relegated into the Championship (“Seasons”). Leicester’s collapse in the face of a revamped Chelsea team appears to have been inevitable; after all, few teams can beat 5000-1 odds once, let alone twice.

Some might believe that Leicester City's success would allow the team to continue to be competitive, which it did to a certain extent. However, the second greatest accomplishment of Leicester City is a fifth-place finish in the 2019/20 season ("Seasons"). Finishing in a position that guarantees European competition in the form of the Europa League is much better than barely surviving relegation, but it is still far from repeating as champions of England. However, Leicester has grown and the catalyst behind that growth is simply money. As a result of winning the Premier League, Leicester accrued £129 million in prize money and television income, leading to a seemingly significant profit (Conn "Leicester City"). However, even with that financial backing Leicester City fell victim to a common occurrence in soccer, one that seemingly protects the caste system.

In an article titled "Is Money Ruining Our Beautiful Game of Football," Chris Dowding explained how the new caste system works: "The big clubs make millions, and spend millions ... Lower down the leagues; however, clubs struggle to make ends meet, [and] have to sell their best players." That is precisely what happened after Leicester City won the Premier League; they were forced to sell their best players. Of the team's three best players (Jamie Vardy, N'Golo Kante, and Riyad Mahrez), two were sold to bigger clubs. In the summer of 2016, N'golo Kante was sold to Chelsea for £32 million, a relatively low price considering how important he had been. In his first season with Roman Abramovich's team, he won the Professional Footballers' Association Player of the Year, singling him out as the most important member of Chelsea's title-winning team. Following Leicester's failed title defense, Riyad Mahrez was sold to Manchester City for £60 million in 2017, and, like Kante, he helped lead Manchester City to win the Premier League the next season (M. Davies). Leicester City's team had been picked apart by

the two most controversial owners in England: Abramovich and Mansour. Leicester City's fairytale was ended by foreign money.



N'Golo Kante holding the 2016/17 PFA Player of the Year Award for his performances for Chelsea.

Leicester's fall may seem to back the argument that the massive injections of money from Abramovich and Sheikh Mansour have hurt the natural progression of the Premier League, but that would be ignoring the context of Dowding's article. The article was written the same year that Mansour's Abu Dhabi United Group acquired Manchester City, but the journalist explained that that article was not a reaction to the Sheikh. He points out, "The first thing to make clear is this: Nobody is to blame for this current state of affairs. It has been an almost organic growth, in tune with football's popularity and the game's economic state" (Dowding). Before Chelsea and Manchester City joined the "Big Six," the caste system simply had fewer teams at the top. Had Manchester City and Chelsea not become the powerhouses of English soccer that they have, Arsenal, Manchester United, Liverpool, and Tottenham would have happily stripped Leicester City of its best players.

Based on betting odds from NBC Sports for the 2020/21 season, the best way to define the caste system is with four tiers: teams competing for Champions League qualification (teams

with +6600 odds or better to win the Premier League), teams competing for Europa League Qualification (teams between +6600 and +15000 odds), teams competing to finish above tenth place (teams with between +15000 and +50000), and teams fighting to avoid relegation (teams with +75000 or worse odds). Using these odds to define the caste system would have the “Big Six” in the top tier, three teams in the second tier, six teams in the third tier, and five teams in the bottom tier (Prince-Wright) Since 2010 when the “Big Six” really came into being, only seven teams have secured Champions League qualification: the members of the “Big Six” and Leicester City (Chaudhary). This demonstrates that the only ways for teams to break the caste system are extreme luck in the case of Leicester City or financial help in the cases of Manchester City and Chelsea.

In an interview with John Williams, an associate professor at the University of Leicester who teaches a college course about Leicester City’s incredible title win, the question was asked: *How can mid-table and relegation candidate teams become title contenders without foreign money and if they cannot why should they be content with mediocrity?* To which Williams simply responded: “They can't. This may seem like 'mediocrity' by some, but just surviving, simply being, in the [English Premier League] today is a major achievement - you compete with the world's best.” Soccer is a global sport, and the notion that a team is content with merely competing against the best teams in England without any chance of winning may seem strange to international fans. The reason behind this is something to which Williams also alluded to during the interview: “British value” (Williams). Soccer in England is based on tradition and many of the fans who Robinson and Clegg depicted as having a “British aversion to any sort of change” still hold their traditional beliefs.

Traditionally there has always been a caste system in English soccer, even before money entered the sport to the extent that it has recently. Traditionally smaller teams had to sell their best players to avoid debt so they could compete. Traditionally, there were no billionaire owners who spent as much money as was necessary to make their teams successful (Dowding). Traditionally, there was no way to break the caste system, and the fans and the teams they supported were content with that state of affairs (Williams). Now only some fans have these traditional values, and the amount of money in the game because of how it has globalized has led tradition to change (Dowding). Today, money trumps tradition.

Financing Fans: Why Money Is So Prevalent

Money is the main driving force behind soccer, so much so that researchers at Duke University stated, “If football is a religion, then to many, money is god” (Lue et al.). Teams in the English Premier League make millions of pounds in revenue each year, and the sources of that revenue can be broken down into several categories: “television money, prize money, player transfers, sponsorships [and] match day revenue.” While these sources of income may appear to be separate most of them can be traced directly to fans. Television deals are the result of fans from all over the world watching the Premier League; sponsorships are given to teams based on the audience they can reach, and “match day revenue,” which includes ticket, food, and merchandise sales at games, comes entirely from fans (“How Do Football Clubs”). Soccer is a business, and every business needs consumers, and in soccer, they are called fans.

The role Sky played in increasing the Premier League’s viewership is quite significant, and the results of this can be seen in how much money the Premier League makes through television deals. The historic success of Sky saw BT Sport join them in 2013 as domestic broadcasters of the Premier League, and the deals between these two companies and the other

international broadcasting companies have totaled over £5 billion from 2015 to 2019. A certain amount of this television money is equally shared between teams in the Premier League, and this sum has manifested in an average of £81 million a year for each team during this time (“How Do Football Clubs”). The first deal Sky negotiated with the Premier League in 1992 was £44.5 million (Robinson and Clegg 41). The five billion pounds the league now receives is an increase of 11136% on that initial sum. That increase is due to the popularity of soccer, and businesses have taken that into account. “Television provided great exposure for any business that didn’t mind spending a few million pounds to get their name out. Millions of people watch...and every single one of them is a potential customer” (Lue et al.). The increase in television viewership made companies interested in ways that they could advertise through soccer, and the main way they have done this is through sponsorships.

There are a variety of ways in which sponsors manifest themselves in the Premier League, but the two chief examples are in stadium naming rights and in jersey deals. Before money became such an integral part of the sport, “Stadia in England were named after the neighborhood in which they were constructed” (Lue et al.). The first team to sell the naming rights for its stadium was Arsenal in 2004. Arsenal had played for decades at its Highbury stadium, but an offer of £100 million from the Emirates Airline soon saw Arsenal playing soccer at the Emirates Stadium. Some teams have kept the historical names of their stadia, but many have followed Arsenal and have acquired another source of income. At the same time Emirates Airline bought the naming rights for Arsenal’s stadium, the company also negotiated a deal to become the shirt sponsor for the team (“How Do Football Stadiums”). Arsenal’s deal was groundbreaking and would pave the way for the influx of money that would occur over the next decade.



Several prominent Arsenal players appear in an advertisement that displays both the team's logo and the Emirates Airline logo.

Logos from top brands have adorned the center of Premier League teams' uniforms ever since the league was created in 1992, but the idea was relatively novel as its roots lie in the 1970s. A team that competed in the lower leagues of English soccer, Kettering Town, was actually the originator of the practice. Kettering Town wore the logo for Kettering Tyres, a local business, instead of wearing its own logo. The English Football Association threatened the team with a fine, but negotiations were held, and sponsorship was allowed. The first top team to adopt a jersey sponsor was Liverpool in 1979, but that was still met with controversy because "The BBC," which broadcast games at the time, "had a strict policy of no advertising, and they wouldn't show teams wearing sponsorship" (Weeks). This policy would eventually change, but it serves as another instance of Robinson and Clegg's documented "English aversion to change."



Kettering Town's jersey displaying the name of local business, Kettering Tyres.

Today, shirt sponsors are an unquestioned aspect of the sport, which poses a great benefit for Premier League teams as “clubs stand to make millions of pounds each year from jersey deals alone.” Most major American sports do not have shirt sponsors other than jersey manufacturers like Nike, Adidas, and Puma. The simple reason why shirt sponsors became so popular in soccer is because of the structure of the game as “only [the] half time [break from play] provides a chance for actual in-game commercials...because of the continuous flow of [soccer,] business found an even more effective place to advertise, the player’s chest.” Without sponsorship on jerseys or in the names of stadia, companies like Emirates Airline, Samsung, and Volkswagen would only have fifteen minutes during the intermission to exploit the television viewership of soccer (Lue et al.). Despite this practice clearly being utilized for profit, fans do not seem to mind that their favorite teams’ logos are dwarfed by corporate symbols, and the teams’ owners certainly do not mind the extra revenue generated by it.

The simplest and least controversial form of income for teams in the Premier League is match day revenue, which is essentially any money made at a team’s stadium on a day when there is a game. Tickets are sold for every game, and when a stadium, like Arsenal’s Emirates

Stadium, has a capacity of 60,000 people, the amount of money that a team makes over the course of a season from ticket sales is relatively high. When the cost of a ticket is then combined with merchandise purchased at a team's gift shop and food and drinks purchased throughout a game, the amount of money made on any given matchday is not insignificant. In the 2014/15 season, Manchester City made £191 million from matchday sales which was almost double the £108 million made from television deals and just slightly less than the £197 million made from sponsorship deals ("How Do Football Clubs"). Matchday sales have been the longest-standing way through which sports teams can make money, and they are also the most directly influenced by fans.

The two primary sources of revenue that are not directly impacted by fans, player transfers, and prize money, comprise a decent amount of the income that teams receive each year. However, while these sources are not directly funded by fans, they are both only one step removed from fans. Matchday revenue and television deals are clearly the results of fans spending money to watch games in person or on a screen, and sponsors make deals with teams based on how many fans the club can reach ("How Do Football Clubs"). Similarly, prize money for how the teams finish in the Premier League is given based on how much money the Premier League makes from television deals, meaning it is indirectly the money that fans give to the television companies.

In the Premier League, all the teams receive an equal share of around £35 million each year, but there are other ways in which the television money is distributed: merit money and facility fees. Merit money is essentially the prize money that teams are given based on how they place in the league table: "every...club gains an extra £1,931,268 for every position higher they finish." Facility fees are given to teams based on how many of their games are actually

broadcast, meaning that teams that play better throughout the season will make more money, as their games will be broadcast more often (Naz). A difference of £1,931,268 between teams that finish close to each other is relatively small and certainly does not provide a significant financial advantage for the team in first place over the team in second place. Since this is the case, teams that do well for a single season, like Leicester City, do not receive a significant enough financial reward compared to other teams that have established fan bases and cannot compete consistently.

If all money in soccer can trace its way back to the pockets of fans, then the massive fees doled out by some clubs in transfer spending can also be traced back. Transfer fees are paid by one club to another in exchange for the rights to negotiate a contract with a player who is still under contract. So, while transfer income does not come from a club's own fans, it does come from the fans of another team, meaning that fans are somewhat responsible for the amount of money their team can spend on player acquisition. However, while transfer fees for individual players can rise to over £100 million, "Often that money is reinvested in other players, so clubs don't necessarily consider it as part of their income" ("How Do Football Clubs"). The amount of money many clubs in the Premier League make from selling players is often much larger than the prize money they receive, but most of the time, that money is just spent replacing the players that were sold. Almost every team spends more money on transfers each year than they make from them, with teams like Manchester City and Chelsea spending significantly more ("Premier League Club Netpend"). So, ultimately the sources of income that actually affect the profits a team makes come from other sources, sources funded directly by their fans.

The Fans' Influence

Sports exist because people watch them, and sports teams make money because people watch them. However, while sports teams are meant to entertain their fans, they are also

businesses. So, a team's first goal is to survive financially and make a profit (Makarov). Most teams are financially stable because of their owners, but there have been a few teams in England that have failed. In 2019, Bury Football Club was expelled from the English Football League, meaning that the team cannot compete in *any* tier of English soccer. The team was expelled because its owner, Steve Dale, could not afford to make debt payments in a way that assured the EFL of the team's "financial viability" ("Bury"). Most teams are not in danger of failing in this way; in fact, most Premier League teams are in debt; the only difference is that their owners can afford to pay the debt (Conn "Premier League"). Therefore, while making a profit is an important interest for most sports teams, it is a goal that most of them can meet fairly easily.

Soccer teams are businesses, but they are businesses that have a special relationship with their customers. Since most teams in the Premier League do not have to worry about making money, they must focus on their secondary interest, which is to entertain their fans (Makarov). Clearly, people watch soccer because it makes them feel joy, so if teams want to entertain their fans, they need to make them happy. Daniel Wann, a sports psychologist, cited a major cause behind people's love for sports: "People like sports because they get self-esteem benefits from it" (Simmons). It is a fascinating phenomenon that people take pride in how their favorite team plays because most fans have no ability to affect this at all. Yet, when a team plays well and appears to care about its fans, "the fans feel treasured, yearning to come back again and again" (Makarov). Individual fans have little impact on a team, yet their willingness to spend money watching and supporting the team allows it to exist. Teams are not entirely ignorant of this fact and try to listen to their fans whenever it is practical.

Obviously, in the Premier League, where there are twenty teams competing against each other each year, only one team will win, and the others will lose, albeit some will lose more than

others. However, the fans know this, and most of them have realistic expectations of what their team can do. When outsiders are observing the Premier League, they must remember what John Williams said when asked if teams lower down in the caste system of the Premier League could expect to move up the table: “They can't. This may seem like 'mediocrity' by some, but just surviving, simply being, in the EPL today is a major achievement - you compete with the world's best” (Williams). This reality seems harsh, but it is one that most fans understand.

It is entirely possible for a team to lose the opportunity to play in the Premier League by being one of the three teams relegated to the Championship, which would result in the loss of millions of pounds of revenue. Knowing this, most fans have realistic expectations for how their team will perform during the season. Teams like Chelsea and Manchester United expect that their team will challenge for the title, but they understand that there are other teams capable of defeating them. Similarly, teams like Leeds United and Newcastle United expect to finish above the bottom three spots and avoid relegation, but they understand that a few unlucky games could see them relegated (Ogden). Fans are hard to satisfy, as some have wildly unrealistic beliefs about their teams. They are disappointed when their team fails to exceed expectations, but when the season concludes, most fans accept the outcome and prepare for the next year.

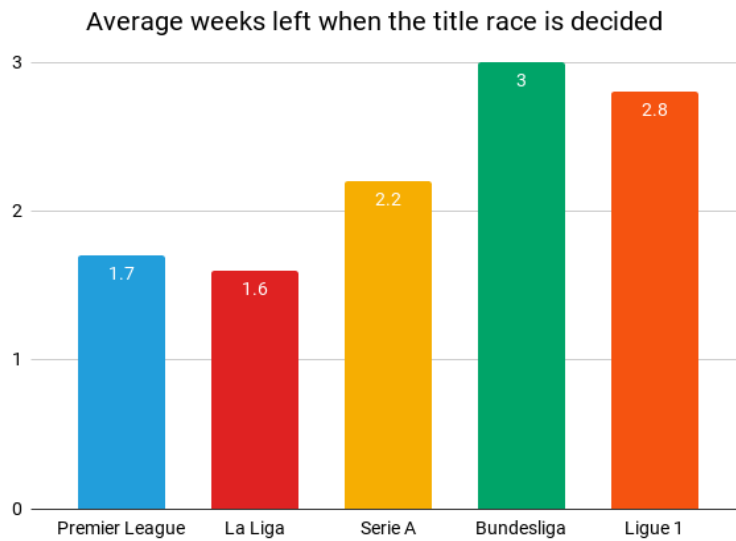


Bolton Wanderers fans show their disappointment and their support as their team is relegated in 2012.

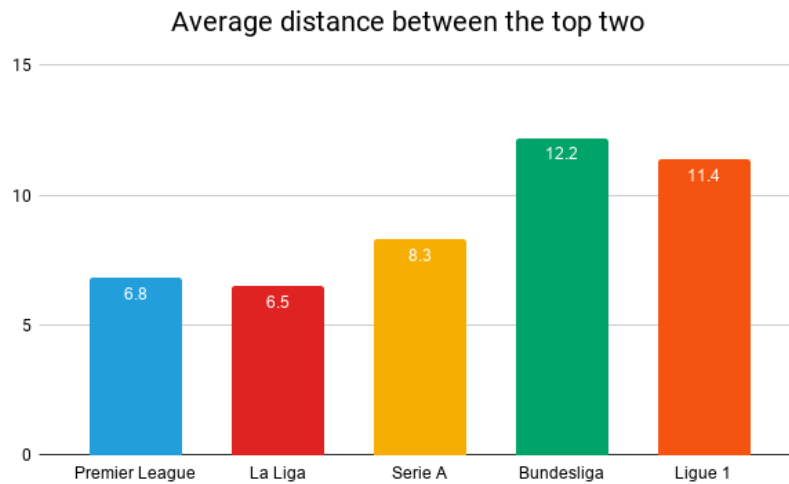
How Billionaire Investors Fulfill the League's Purpose

While fans of different teams in the Premier League have vastly different expectations based on their team's traditional place in the caste system, they share one common belief: "The Premier League (EPL) is...the best football league in the world." Fans in England and all around the world believe that the Premier League is simply the best and the most entertaining. Usually, when asked to define why England's top division is better than those of Spain, Germany, Italy, and France, fans simply say that the Premier League is more competitive (Spacey). However, the Premier League was not always a race between the "Big Six," but was merely a horse race between Arsenal and Manchester United. It was not until Roman Abramovich invested in Chelsea and Sheikh Mansour invested in Manchester City that the Premier League became more quantifiably competitive than the other top leagues across Europe (Chaudhary). If fans of the Premier League are willing to boast about the league's high level of competition, they should be willing to thank the foreign investors who made it possible.

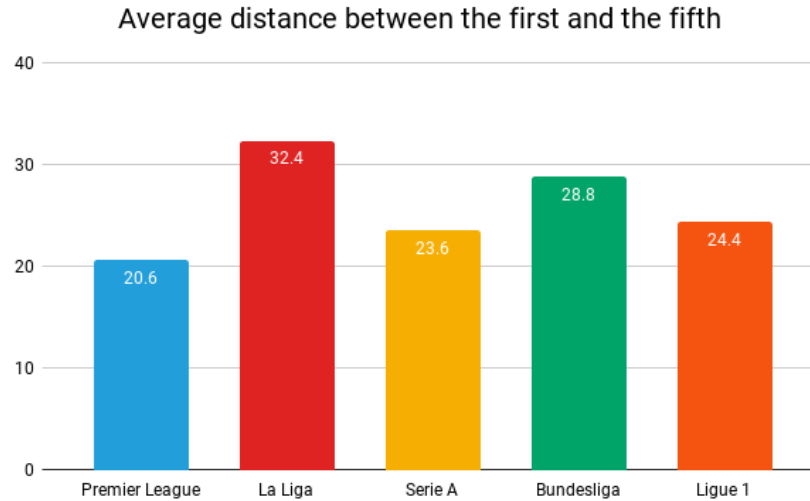
Vyom Chaudhary, an avid proponent of the belief that the Premier League is the best in the world, has compiled a list of statistics in an attempt to quantifiably prove the league's superiority. Comparing the English Premier League to the Italian Serie A, German Bundesliga, French Ligue 1, and Spanish LaLiga, Chaudhary displays the vast difference in overall competition between the leagues. From 2010 to 2019, the Premier League has the second-lowest average number of weeks left before the title is decided with 1.7.



It had the second-lowest average number of points between first place and second place with 6.8.



It had the lowest average number of points between first and fifth place with 20.6.



And it also had the second-highest number of different champions with four (the study was conducted prior to Liverpool winning the title in the 2019/20 season) (Chaudhary). The Premier League may not finish first in every category, but none of the other leagues finish in the top two spots of each category like the Premier League does. Out of all the statistics Chaudhary compiled, the one that seems to best indicate that the Premier League is the most competitive is the fact that the average distance between first and fifth place is the lowest out of all the other leagues, meaning it has more teams that compete for the title each season. Chaudhary's statistics began in the year 2010, which, interestingly enough, was one year after Sheikh Mansour purchased Manchester City, leading to the formation of the "Big Six."

Obviously, games in which more goals are scored are more entertaining, so another quantifiable statistic that demonstrates how the Billionaire investors have improved the quality of play in the Premier League is in the number of goals scored since they arrived. Theoretically, better players purchased with foreign money should score more goals and the statistics prove this to be true. From 1992 to 2003, the average number of goals per game in the Premier League was 2.62. After Roman Abramovich invested in Chelsea in 2003, that number rose to 2.68, and after Sheikh Mansour invested at Manchester City, the number rose to 2.73. Out of the eighteen

seasons, since Abramovich first invested in 2003, the top-scoring team in the league has been either Chelsea or Manchester City nine times, and Manchester City currently holds the record for the most goals scored in a single season with 106 in the 2017/18 season (“Premier League Goal”). The investments of Abramovich and Mansour have undoubtedly made the Premier League more entertaining, and while fans like Stefan Symanski may continue to claim “they bought the league,” the counterargument can always be made that they bought better soccer as well.

Addressing the European Super League

_____ On Sunday, April 18th, 2021, an announcement was made that seemed to threaten the very heart of European soccer. Twelve teams, including the Premier League’s traditional “Big Six,” were reportedly forming the European Super League, a league that contradicts the fundamental belief in fair competition that is essential to soccer. It was unclear whether the proposal would take effect as U.E.F.A, F.I.F.A., and almost every European Football Association have condemned the league because it would include fifteen permanent members that could never be relegated and would only allow for five teams from across Europe the opportunity to compete with those fifteen teams each season (Goodman and Mello).

The creation of the competition directly attacked U.E.F.A.’s Champions League, which has always been considered the most prestigious tournament in all of European club soccer. The founding members of the Super League wanted to replace the Champions League because they felt entitled to compete at the highest level every season, despite their not all being able to qualify for U.E.F.A.’s competition. On Monday, April 19th, 2021, a Premier League match between Liverpool and Leeds United was held, and the Leeds players wore shirts that encapsulated the feeling that many fans across the world had expressed on social media.

Warming up before the game, the Leeds players' shirts read "Earn it" under an image of the Champions League logo, and "Football is for the fans" (Bengel). The world mourned what it believed would be the death of the current structure of European soccer, and blame was laid at the feet of the foreign billionaire owners who brokered the deal.



Leeds United players send a message to the "Big Six" before their match against Liverpool.

In an impassioned tirade, Gary Neville, a pundit for Sky Sports and an extremely successful former Manchester United player, stated that for the owners "to demonstrate greed rather than compassion is an absolute shocker as far as I'm concerned." Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tier system of the English Football League has faced a major economic threat, and the idea that the biggest clubs in England would abandon the other teams that helped them achieve greatness is truly despicable (Neville). Due to the severe backlash from fans which saw multiple protests outside of teams stadiums and millions of posts on social media, the "Big Six" pulled out of the Super League. The deal would have made the owners millions, but fear of fans boycotting the games neutralized the incentive (Hellier et al.). The owners realized that money comes from the fans, and the fans proved the extent of their collective power. They do not make decisions the same way the owners do, but when they all combine against something no

billionaire owners can resist them, and that is because the fans are the biggest billionaires of them all, they are just a different kind of billionaire, a collective billionaire.

Conclusion:

The men charged with the murder of soccer may well be the foreign billionaire owners, but that does not mean they are solely to blame for the crime. Billionaire owners helped foster competition because it seemed like they understood that winning the Premier League or the Champions League only mattered because of the competitions' prestige; that is why they spent so much of their own money helping their teams win. The European Super League would have had no prestige because the fans did not respect it, no matter how competitive or dramatic it could have been. The fans generated the money that enticed the billionaires into soccer, and that money is what led to the idea of the Super League.

The owners have always been the easiest to blame for the league's woes, but that cannot take away from the fact that they did improve the quality of the Premier League. They allowed the caste system to be reshaped because the bottom line is that even without Roman Abramovich and Sheikh Mansour, there would still be a massive disparity between the top teams and the rest of the teams in England. There is no way for the caste system to be entirely broken because there is a real disparity that exists in the amount of money that teams make each year. The fans want the Premier League to be fair, but the only way for that to happen would be for a salary cap to be introduced or for every team in England to share all their revenue equally. However, that would go against the true essence of competition because at the end of a competition there are always winners and losers, and they will reap the rewards they deserve, so disparity was inevitable whether it was manufactured or whether it was earned. The fans may despise the foreign

billionaire owners because they are the face of the system, but what they fail to acknowledge is that the billions that built the system came from their own pockets.

