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Politics and sport: a non-fan goes to the football

James Bryce reacquaints himself with the niceties of the national game and finds memories, questions and a few answers being kicked around.

I'm neither a footballer nor a football fan. My playing went "off the ball" in late primary school owing to a fear of being kicked in the shins. This led to the cunning tactic of running at a distance of three yards from the ball, muttering "To me! To me!" with the blessed assurance that no one would take me up on it.

Until today, I had only ever been at two matches. The first, in Wembley in 1977, remained a blank to me but once the game was over and the Scots fans set about dismantling the goalposts to take home as souvenirs, I did have the delightful vision of a Met inspector, tartan scarf slung round his neck, swigging at a bottle of whisky. At the second – Oxford United I think it was... or was it City? – I made the momentous discovery that footballers did an awful lot of running.

So given all that, why am I heading for Tynecastle, home of Heart of Midlothian FC (dubbed "Swinecastle" by their Edinburgh rivals, Hibernian) on a soggy wet day in June?

The answer lies in the car-park of said ground, where some three dozen pro-Palestinian protesters, keenly watched by a dozen police officers or more, have gathered to vocalise their views on Israel, represented on this occasion by the Israeli women's football team, playing Scotland in some leg of the UEFA cup.

Everything has been passed by the police. However, having been assured that banners are allowed to a height of a metre, we are now informed that the club itself feels that a metre is a metre too high. I have to keep reminding myself that I'm not a criminal.

We take our places in our allocated bank of the stand. The players enter the field, Scotland in the familiar blue tops, Israel all in white. Suddenly, I have a curious feeling of dislocation: they're just wee lassies! Well, maybe not that wee, but I'm sure you know what I mean; they seem so separate from the political landscape we are here to protest about.

The game starts. Gemma Fay, the Scottish goalie (her 142nd cap for Scotland) stands forlorn at her posts, the reason being that all the play is at the other end. Thirty minutes later, Israel are five goals down. The Scottish team skills are well evident, and for the first time I begin to appreciate the teamwork involved.

All the while, the chants go on. I develop a rather personal system: if the ongoing chant is making a political point, I happily join in; if it gets on to casting aspersions on their playing – and frankly they have some way to go – I keep quiet, or divert the chant back to the original theme. Fair enough, some of the less salubrious slogans are things you would hear at any match, but I feel I want to stick to the point. I notice we are filmed by one of our law-enforcing guardians. Again the feeling of a criminal.

At half-time, conversations are struck up. Some people ask why we are here, so we explain. One, quite strident, yells angrily, "Leave the lassies alone! They just want to play football! What has the Middle East goat tae dae wi' us? Or you?"

And indeed it is difficult to explain. How do you start to explain the interlinkedness of all things? At one level, the local level, there is only the match itself: just two teams using their skills to outplay each other. At another level, the global level, there is money, trade, countries rubbing each others' backs. In a word, politics. And individually, in this country at least, there is the democratic right to express one's views, wherever and whenever, using whatever vehicle we can to inform, be it to only a few passing punters at a match.

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It's an uneasy conundrum. It would be wonderful if sport could be kept separate from politics as a whole, but personally I don't think it can.

The teams leave the pitch, whites now totally muddied. Scotland eight, Israel nil.

As I make my way home, frozen and drenched, a sudden thought comes to me: why are Israel in the UEFA cup? Isn't that for European teams? Why are they here? A moment's reflection brings the answer: "No one in their region will play them."

So why are they in Scotland? Someone must have made the decision. No, I don't think it can be kept separate. And I don't think it is.

James Bryce is The Leisure Review's Scottish arts correspondent.

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