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## Will we miss football when it's gone?

With the World Cup only months away and the clamour of the Premier League growing ever louder, the Leisure Review wonders whether anyone in charge of football considered the implications of the Save Grassroots Football campaign and whether the voice of parks football might one day be seen as the Siren call that spelled doom for the professional game.

When the chairman of the FA comes to sit down with the chairman of the Premier League to reflect on what happened to the game they loved and all the riches it delivered, they might eventually conclude that the fateful moment, the point of no return, came in the first weeks of 2014 when football went on strike.

Readers of the Leisure Review will recall the outline of the story. Fearing for the future of the game he loved, Kenny Saunders launched the Save Grassroots Football campaign to highlight the state of football at its most humble level. He sought to draw attention to the rising costs, the falling ability to pay and the gradual erosion of the enthusiasm to play across the Saturday and Sunday leagues. Dealing with poor facilities and facing hikes in the charges for pitches imposed by cash-strapped local authorities, teams in the north west of England and in other parts of the country declined to fulfil their league fixtures in an attempt to draw attention to the state of the national game, a game that stubbornly exists in the shadows just beyond the bright lights of the professional game. The Save Grassroots Football campaign was hoping that the Premier League would consider its responsibilities to the grassroots and make available a little more of its £5.5 billion income for 2013-16 available to the lower levels, at least a bit more than the 1% to which it has reluctantly committed.

The Premier League's response was predictable enough. There was a little quiet condescension, some polite bluster and a vague justification of the benefits of wealth creation. There was a reiteration of the Premier League's values, expressed crisply and concisely on its website: "The Barclays Premier League is all about the football," it says. "Watching the fantastic players and exciting matches creates the support that drives the broadcast and the commercial interest that ensures we can re-invest in the game, both domestically and globally... we work proactively and constructively with our member clubs and the other football authorities to improve the quality of football both in England and across the world." Within a few days the sports news agenda had moved on to the next set of Premier League results and the matter was quietly dropped.

But despite the carefully crafted statements, this image of the park-based game asserting itself against the financial might of the Premier League seemed to some to have rather more resonance than a little local difficulty in the public relations of a major corporation. For some – the romantics, the cynics, the economic sceptics, perhaps – this contradiction seemed to represent one more symptom of a malady that might just prove fatal.

Other symptoms are not hard to spot and they set the context for a debate on the state of the self-styled national game and its future. Take by way of example a single page of the sports pages on a random Tuesday in early March [Guardian sports section, p 6, 4 March 2014]. With continuing reaction to Alan Pardew's apparent head-butt on an opposition player the previous weekend slipping below the fold, the [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)

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page lead is the conviction of Carson Yeung, the de facto owner of Birmingham City, in Hong Kong on charges of money-laundering and handling the proceeds of crime to the tune of £55 million. We are reminded that Mr Yeung was approved by the Premier League to lead an £80 million takeover of Birmingham, having been subject to the Premier League's 'fit and proper person' tests.

Next to this story is the call by a member of the Labour shadow front bench for Britain's representative on Fifa's executive committee to join a study tour to Qatar in which the conditions of those working to deliver the world governing body's highly lucrative showcase will be explored. While these conditions have been described by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International as amounting to forced labour and the International Trade Union Confederation has warned that the working practices and conditions could result in the deaths of 4,000 workers, Fifa has dismissed suggestions that the death toll in preparing to host World Cup – whether for Brazil 2014 or Qatar 2022 – is its responsibility. Fifa's pronouncements also clearly imply that it does not consider such matters as within its sphere of influence or its concern.

Further down the page comes details of Aston Villa's finances and the suggestion that a loss of £52 million for the financial year 2012-13 might have implications for the club's ability thrive in the Premier League or to meet Uefa's financial fair play regulations. These results follow a £34 million loss for 2011-12 and the extension of loans to the club from its American owner, Randy Lerner, to a total of more than £100 million. Villa's chief financial officer is reported to be confident that the club is moving towards breaking even.

On days either side of this snapshot of the football news there are stories that illustrate the essence of top-flight football: stories of Wayne Rooney's £300,000-a-week basic salary and the £85 million that Manchester United will be spending over the next five and half years to keep him as part of their squad; discussion of a new coaching culture for the England national team at the FA's St George's Park, a national centre that cost more than £100 million to develop; news of Arsenal's, Aaron Ramsey, doubling his money to £100,000 a week, making him probably the second most highly paid player in Arsene Wenger's notoriously underpaid squad.

While the money in professional football is now an accepted part of modern life, most people would find it difficult not to have some sympathy with Kenny Saunders as he contemplates another weekend of matches on mudbath pitches with non-existent changing facilities. For all the confidence displayed by the Premier League that it is "the most competitive and compelling league" in the world, most people with any feeling for the game find the "You are football" advertising that currently shout from the hoardings of Premier League games deeply ironic. A significant number would probably find the boast on the Premier League's website that "watching the fantastic players and exciting matches creates the support that drives the broadcast and the commercial interest that ensures we can re-invest in the game, both domestically and globally" not only ironic but powerfully emetic.

But of course there is little chance that the best league in the world, a multi-billion pound corporation with a globally recognised brand, could come a commercial cropper. That said, there are a few aspects of the national game that might keep a worried person awake at nights. For example, there is a growing suggestion that the football market might be a little more price-sensitive than some had assumed. Witness the spread of organised protests against ticket prices and the fact that a significant number of seats at a significant number of Premier League grounds go unsold on match days. There is also a suspicion that the audience for top-flight football, by necessity individuals with time and disposable income available, might be ageing, raising the alarming prospect of the Premier League fan base dying out. Clubs and the

football authorities can point to their family- and youth-friendly pricing schemes and promotional offers but a quick glimpse at Match of the Day confirms that the proportion of people under 25 making up the matchday crowd is not high; unaccompanied under-18s, once the mainstay of football's audience development, are probably statistically non-existent.

It is undeniable that the Premier League is currently riding high in all commercial measurements but a worried person might wonder whether there is a chance that this boom could be a bubble. Allowing clubs to be owned, bought and sold by individuals and corporations wherever in the world they happen to be based and however they choose to be structured has allowed the Premier League and the clubs that aspire to join it to tap into huge revenue streams. This investment has enabled British clubs to buy the best talent, build the best stadiums and make the biggest profits. But nothing bursts a bubble quicker than overstretched commercial ambitions or the sharp point of corporate corruption. Whether the behaviour of the Glazers at Manchester Utd represents impressive entrepreneurialism or cynical sharp practice depends on your perspective but who would have the confidence to bet the farm on the bona fides of Carson Yeung?

If one were looking for trouble, perhaps the biggest threat might be the growing distance between the game and its audience; or, in terms rather more recognisable to the modern football community, between the product and the market. Ownership of clubs by foreign conglomerates, the commercialisation of every aspect of the football experience, the ethical void that seems to yawn ever wider with every season: all this and more serves to gradually erode and slowly undermine the status of football as the national game. While the Premier League and the FA can take comfort in growing receipts and the expanding international markets, there are suggestions that there is a growing mood for change. The small but growing number of clubs established and owned by their fans, the continuing protests over ticket prices and the frustrations of random kick-off times and expensive travel are all reactions to a changing market but are reactions that do not reflect well on the product being offered.

That this mood for change should be most elegantly expressed by kids on waterlogged pitches who change in a shipping container that leaks rather than the governing body for their sport is a damning indictment of the game that football has become. That these kids have to threaten to walk away from the game they love just to get their absurdly wealthy professional counterparts to think about helping them out is sadder still. That no one seems to have actually listened to them or addressed their concerns should be shaming to anyone involved in football in the UK.

As the pitches begin to dry out and another World Cup approaches we are entitled to look at our national game and ask what will become of it. We are also entitled to ask whether the leadership of the national and international game is of sufficiently high quality to guide an enterprise of such commercial heft and such social importance. Given that this leadership has, in terms of vision, integrity and courage, repeatedly been found wanting over the years, our worried person may find themselves awake long into the night for quite a bit longer yet; or at least until the rain stops coming through the roof of the shipping container that hundreds of kids change in before they go out to play.

#### ***The Leisure Review, March 2014***

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