

Football: A personal perspective

by Leo Mann

Football has had a huge influence on my life - in so many ways.

Through playing, watching and debating the game I've met some amazing people, made some of my best friends and experienced so many highs, be it celebrating a last minute goal to win a game or helping my team win a trophy.

It hasn't always been all smiles though. There have been lots of occasions I've wished I could divorce my affections for the game.

Losing to Arsenal in the North London derby (again), conceding a last minute goal in a cup semi final, watching your school mates reap the rewards of supporting a team that regularly wins trophies... the list goes on. But despite these lows I would never swap my experiences.

In many ways I think that learning to accept defeat gracefully helped me appreciate the good times and show leadership and compassion through the bad times

However, there are some negative situations I have experienced that I would never wish on anyone.

As a fan, I clearly remember hearing racist comments when watching my team as a youngster. What made things worse was that I was one of very, very few visible ethnic minorities at the games. This was something I wasn't used to as I attended a very ethnically diverse school.

After a while I'd learned to block out the comments, but I was always more worried about my father. As a mixed race person going to games with my white father I felt there would come a day when he would confront a racist. I didn't want that. Fortunately it never happened.

On the pitch I'd play most of my football on Hackney Marshes, probably home to the most diverse football leagues in the world. I'd rarely hear anything racist on the marshes. But the polarised nature of the teams would always bug me. Why did there have to be a black team, white team, Asian team, Turkish team... surely we were all living amongst each other?

Playing football at University was like entering a completely different world. Suddenly I was one of three black players in a squad. A complete shift from the ethnic make up I was used to.

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The games against other Uni's were fine, but against some of the local teams the abuse was shocking. Something I was never prepared for.

In one game I went down injured and a member of the opposition called out "give him a banana and he'll get up". Laying on the floor all I could hear was laughter. The referee did nothing but encourage me to leave the pitch so the game could continue. It's hard to explain in words how that experience made me feel, but the one word that springs to mind is - lonely.

It was following this incident that I decided I wanted to make a contribution to addressing racism some way. So when I left University I offered to volunteer at Kick It Out, football's anti-racism campaign.

The campaign aims to deal with racism and discrimination in the game through raising awareness of issues and working together with the governing bodies of the game, including The Football Association, to ensure the frustrations of victims of discrimination and exclusion are being addressed with action.

In my time with the campaign I have seen Kick It Out develop its work. We now address anti-semitism, the abuse of Traveller and Gypsy communities, the treatment of refugees and those seeking Asylum and also support gay rights campaigners in the fight against Homophobia in the game.

There have also been some significant steps taken in the campaigns approach. No longer is the message solely that racism is wrong, Kick It Out is now highlighting the role that communities themselves are playing in addressing problems and the issues of exclusion they are facing.

As the campaign has developed, the situation has improved. But for the Kick It Out it is essential that we ensure people understand that although those who used to abuse people at the

football are quiet for 90 minutes, we still need to change their hearts and minds.

It was the highs and lows I experienced that made me want to make my contribution to challenging racism and discrimination, and help improve a situation I was deeply frustrated with.

Things are certainly getting better. I am confident we can drive on from here and continue to channel the power of the game for positive change