

Football: A personal view

by Rachel Wagstaff

I blame my family. We were on holiday in Norwich in 1991 when they took me to Carrow Road – my first football game. I've been a long-suffering Norwich fan ever since. My mum supports Hereford, my brother Matt Crystal Palace, my brother Mike Watford, and my dad thinks Danny Blanchflower still plays. Don't ask.

What was it about football? It was a nil-nil draw, so it can't have been the goals.... As you near the stadium, the air's steeped in excitement and the smell of frying onions. You walk up the steps and that moment when you first see the pitch... and everyone's cheering and you've no idea what's going to happen... magic.

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When I moved to London, my brother Mike took me to Regents Park, looking for a game. We met a bunch of guys and had a great kick around. They said we should come back the following week. It turns out that the games were organised by the-only-other-woman, Judith, who has been an inspiration and has now become a great friend. Years later, we still play with some of them, we're friends with others who've become too fat and lazy to play, we even go to each other's weddings. One of the guys, Hasan, a Man City fan, helped me with details for this play.

Football is massive in today's society. It's played all over the world, and could be an incredible force for good. It can also unleash the darkest side of humanity. It must be channelled in the right way, as a way of reaching out to each other across the world, as a way of sweeping through barriers of race, class and gender. Football for all.

I went to the World Cup in 2006 with my brothers and some friends. We'd go along to the Fan Fests to watch the games, never saw any trouble whatsoever. In fact, we'd usually get into a kick around with people from countries we'd never been to, often playing with team-mates whose languages we didn't speak. In this world steeped in xenophobia, individualism, fear of the other, football can be a wonderful way of levelling the playing field.

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We need to fight against prejudice and bullying wherever we find it. I was shocked to discover that a study in Manchester showed that 60% of Bangladeshi boys play football, 43.1% of Pakistani boys, and 36.5% of Indians, compared to 47% of young white males.

So why are there fewer than 10 Asian players (at time of going to print) out of 4000 in the whole of the professional league? West Ham and Leicester are among clubs who have set up schemes to get young Asians into football. But we need to tackle this inequality at a grass roots level too and combat racism, continuing the great work of 'Kick it Out'. Similarly, I was shocked to find that some teenage girls I interviewed thought there was no point playing football because no women play in the Premiership.

Although the profile of the women's game is rising all the time, more needs to be done to make people aware that the women's game is entirely separate from the men's game. Girls need to be encouraged to start playing from a young age, if they wish to do so, so that they don't suffer from my fate (lazy and unfit as a kid).

Equally frightening, the fact that no Premier League manager would even comment on why there are no openly gay professional players, when asked by Five Live. Why is this such a taboo? How can we break through this and rid the game of this prejudice too? Man City have signed up as 'Diversity Champions' with Stonewall, but we need more clubs and people within the game to step up to the mark.

The F.A. is doing a great deal to tackle discrimination and harassment as well as promote equality within the game but we, as fans, as members of society, as human beings need to add our voice to theirs. If we all stand together, if we all strive for tolerance and absolute human equality, then perhaps we can make our world a better place, with football for all helping us along the way.

Rachel Wagstaff August 2007