

I Love Football

A Match Made in Heaven

Hunter Davies

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Football Fans Follow Football Teams



MOST PEOPLE HAVE a favourite team. Whether they are old or young, male or female, big or small. All around the globe you'll find people have a team which they follow.

When I say most people, I really do mean lots and lots and lots of people. I know that not many follow our sort of football in the USA, poor things. But the USA is about the only

major country which is not madly, daftly, in love with football.

Football is the sport followed by most people in the world, either by going to games, reading about it in newspapers or watching it on television. That's a fact.

Most people who love football follow a team. That's not quite as obvious as it might sound. There are a few who are interested in football but who don't have a particular team. They just like to see football being played. And there are others who only take an interest when there's a big game, a big competition, a big drama about to unfold.

Most of us, though, have our own team. Sometimes more than one. They will drive you potty, cause you endless grief, make you wish you had never been stuck with them.

The point of loving a team is that from time to time you will also hate this team. That's how it works. Football is the perfect example of a love-hate relationship.

So, if we agree that most people have a favourite football team, where does that team come from? I mean how do we fall in love with the

team or teams we follow? Ah, that is interesting. There is no one answer to that. In fact I can think of ten.

1. *We can inherit a team.* We are born with it because our father, our mother, our nan, followed a particular team. So we do the same. It is in the blood.

2. *Where we live.* Sometimes getting your team has nothing to do with the family you are born into. It is all about where you grew up.

It could happen that no one in your family has ever followed a special team, and such families do exist, so I am told. In that case the chances are you will follow your local team, the club that plays nearest to the place or area you were born in or where you were brought up.

It's usually the same team you would have followed anyway, if you had inherited a team. But not always. For instance, as all non-Manchester United fans know, there are lots of Red Devil fans in Kent. I wonder why. Family reasons? It can't be geography. Or is it something to do with my point 3 below?

The same thing happens in Italy. Italian fans follow Juventus without ever having been to

Turin in their lives. And in Spain. You will find Real Madrid fans all over Spain.

3. *Fashion*. There are certain people who, at an age when they are easily influenced, will choose to follow a team because that team is very fashionable. And this isn't always at a young age. Adults fall for fashion as well. It usually also means that the team is successful.

So they will decide to follow this team and identify with it, because lots of other people are doing the same. It gives them status in the playground, the office, the factory, the pub. Or so they like to think.

There is nothing wrong with that, just as long as they stick with this team, even when, as will surely happen, that team becomes not quite as successful or as trendy as it used to be.

You can often tell the age of a person by the team they follow, if by chance they have acquired that team for fashionable reasons.

For example, lots of people growing up in the 1980s, in Britain and in Europe, decided to follow Liverpool – because they were a brilliant, exciting team. In the 1990s, Manchester United attracted a lot of fans from all over the country, and the globe, because they were playing so

well. And in the same way, for the next ten years, expect Chelsea to pick up lots of new followers, a lot of them kids wanting to be into the very latest thing that everyone is talking about. It's fashion, innit.

4. *Odd reasons.* There are also people who will deliberately choose a team which is not fashionable. This can happen at a point in their lives when they might not have a team of their own or just fancy supporting a second team. They pick upon one doing badly, whom no one in the playground or the pub seems to support.

They will decide, say, that poor old Rochdale is a joke team, with terribly small crowds. Who in their right mind will support them? So they decide they will. No, they won't actually go to their games, but they will follow their results, look out for player transfers and news. They might even go as far as to buy one of Rochdale's classic shirts. In fact, the old-style Rochdale jersey is rather pretty and unusual. The new fan might want to wear it to the pub – preferably when drunk.

When they see on television that Rochdale has managed an exciting scoreless draw at home against Grimsby, preferably while they

are still standing in the pub, they will jump up and punch the air, scream out loud YES!!!! It's called following the underdog.

5. *Vague connections.* It might be that your Auntie Maisy lives in Boston in Lincolnshire. You once had a jolly nice holiday there when you were a lad. You've always had a soft spot for Boston United. Bless them.

Or let's say your first job in life took you to Perth in Scotland. You didn't know until then where Perth was. Or that it had a football team. You certainly didn't know that it was called St Johnstone. But you decided to go along one day, trying to get into the local culture. And when there you thought, 'Aye, not a bad wee team, not a bad wee ground, and an awfully nice wee town. I'll keep an eye on them from now on. Come on you Saints.'

6. *One of their players attracted you.* Rather surprisingly, this is not all that common. It should be, really, but following a team seems to come before following any of its individual players.

But it does happen. Back in the 1930s, many people became interested in, and then followed, Stoke City – purely because their star

player was Stanley Matthews. In the 1950s, there were many fans of Billy Wright who started following Wolverhampton Wanderers, just because of Billy.

I know someone who follows Arsenal – though in fact he has only ever seen them once (when I gave him a spare ticket). He's a minicab driver and can't normally afford the time off, or get his hands on a ticket. He came from Ghana to London fourteen years ago and the first player he really noticed was Paul Davis, of Arsenal. So Arsenal became his team. He has an Arsenal sticker on his minicab and an Arsenal calendar in his kitchen.

I also have a friend who follows Southampton – purely because he liked the look of James Beattie. He probably fancied him, deep down, but we won't go into that. Now, Beattie has long left Southampton, but my friend remains a Southampton fan. He got sort of stuck supporting them. The tide moved on, but he decided to stay behind and be loyal to the Saints. No, not those Saints from bonny Perth this time. Different Saints. Football can be very confusing.

7. *You liked the manager.* Again, this is rare,

but I was always interested by Brian Clough and followed Nottingham Forest, just because of him. Bill Shankly also had his personal fans. José Mourinho of Chelsea will have people following his progress, transfixed by his personality, wherever he goes to in the future. Or maybe it is just the overcoat he wears that they like. Who knows?

8. *You picked a team because someone you knew liked them.* Tony Blair, our blessed Prime Minister, follows Newcastle United. That's what he has told the world. I don't think, deep down, he is a mad football fan, just a smooth politician. Although he was born in Edinburgh, he looks upon Durham as his home town. That's where he spent his early childhood and he went to school at Durham Choristers. Living in Durham, in his younger years, meant that Newcastle United became his local big team. So that's all right then. It's in line with reason 2, above, because of geography.

But what about his two older sons? Guess which team they support.

One of them follows Liverpool. Why? If you think carefully for a few moments, run through the various reasons I have already suggested,

then it might strike you. No, it wasn't an Aunt Maisy who lived in Liverpool, but Tony Blair's wife, Cherie. She comes from Liverpool. So that's the reason. Euan follows Liverpool because that's where his mum comes from.

But Nicholas, the next son, is a follower of Manchester United – for reasons you would never guess.

When he was little, the Blairs had a nanny who was a mad keen Manchester United fan. She followed them, even wore their strip, and so Nicholas did too. And it has stuck.

9. *Football shirts.* Why can't that be a reason for adopting a team, if their strip is pretty, with a nice design? It's as good a reason as any.

I've always had a soft spot for Blackburn Rovers, purely because of their blue and white chequered shirts. They have changed the pattern over the decades, and today the shirts are not quite as attractive as they once were. All the same, there's still a hint of that traditional style which I do like.

I always loved the lettering on the Real Madrid shirts. I liked the style in which they wrote the names and numbers on the back of their shirts. For many years, they were done in

a style like the lettering you often see stamped on wooden boxes of oranges. Now, alas, Real Madrid have changed the style. It's now an ordinary, boring sort of typeface which every club uses. I find myself not being as interested in Real Madrid as I once was.

10. *Their name.* Wolverhampton Wanderers. Don't those two long words look and sound really good?

Wolverhampton Wanderers sounds like a real name for a real football team. I'd be attracted to them, seriously, if I didn't have enough football teams that I count as my own.

Accrington Stanley, that's another brilliant name. Oh I do hope they start doing well again.

Boca Juniors is one of Argentina's most famous clubs. I've never seen them play, have never been to Argentina, but if I ever did, I'd make a point of going to a game.

I also like the sound of Newell's Old Boys. Hmm, that could be awkward. Which would I choose to watch, should I find myself in Argentina? I guess it would depend who was at home that day.

Perhaps the best sounding football names, to my ears, are Scottish ones. I love the ring of

Hamilton Academicals. Heart of Midlothian – now isn't that romantic? Queen of the South – that's another lovely name.

I do follow Queen of the South, as it happens, for reasons I will now reveal.