You'll never walk alone: snapshots of British football, love, loss, pride, shame, hope, inclusion and a song

Original Article

International Review of Qualitative Research
2021, Vol. 0(0) 1–8

DOI: 10.1177/19408447211049526
journals.sagepub.com/home/irq


You'll Never Walk Alone: Snapshots of British Football, Love, Loss, Pride, Shame, Hope, Inclusion and A Song

Kitrina Douglas[1]

Abstract
This reflections explores some of the highs and lows of songs sung on the terraces at British football clubs. In particular I draw on some of my childhood experience to explore how songs can breathe hope and inclusion.

Keywords
football, sport, songs

It was a normal Saturday afternoon, which meant my father was taking me to watch the football. While semi-pro level was now behind him, he still seemed to exude the appetite and enthusiasm of a ten-year-old child. If he wasn't playing himself, which would always be his first choice, he would be looking out for a team to watch. He didn't seem to hold allegiances, or preferences: this week it might be "the Rovers" and the next it would be "City."

If you're from the UK, you'll most probably recognise the terms, Rovers, City, United, Wanderers, Athletic, as differentiating between footballs teams/clubs within the same city. In Glasgow, for example, its Rangers and Celtic. In Edinburgh, its Hearts and

[1]SSHS, Leeds Beckett University, Ealing, Ireland

Corresponding Author:
Kitrina Douglas, SSHS, Leeds Beckett University, Paragon House, Boston Manor Road, Brentford, Ealing W55RF, Ireland.
Email: kitrinadouglas@gmail.com

Hibs, in Manchester, you'll find United and City, and in my home town of Bristol, the two main teams are Bristol City and Bristol Rovers.

I'm not sure why my father was happy watching both City and Rovers. Perhaps this 6ft 4inch centre forward from Belfast had faced enough sectarianism when he moved to Bristol from Ireland as a small boy. Perhaps, healing divides and looking to evade rivalry enabled him to enjoy watching either and/or both teams. Perhaps because it was that he had established catholic friends and they had changed his perception. Maybe his vision for life and football was the kind of utopian vison for sport that Nelson Mandela believed was possible when he said "sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people." (Mandela, 2000). Perhaps watching *the beautiful game*, as it's often referred to, allow him to side step the politics and sectarianism?

However, despite my father's appreciation of and love for the skills and flair of the players football in the UK in the 1970s and 80s was known for its power to divide people, to uphold sectarian divisions, to promote tribalism and hooliganism, and bloody battles between opposing fans were common.

Sometimes the powerful punch of rivalry would be delivered with a playful motif. Bristol City football club, for example, had sometime in their history, because of the bright red shirts the players wore, been nicknamed affectionately "the robins." The fans adopted a song written and recorded by Bob Crosby in 1939 and then later by—among others–by Doris Day, Bing Crosby and Dean Martin. "*when the red red robin comes bob bob bobbing along, along*." It's a happy song, full of hope. When the team would take to the pitch however, and the home terraces rang with "When the red red robin…," the away supporters usually interjected with, "shoot the bastard."

This type of humour was often much darker. In Glasgow, where my father worked, we'd also go to the football. Here sectarian divisions between Catholics and Protestants fuelled the antagonism between the protestant team, Glasgow Rangers who wore blue, and the Catholic team, Glasgow Celtic, who wore green and white hoops. The fans' allegiance could be seen across the city, by the colours they wore, not just on the terraces chanting at each other. After the death of the Pope Paul VI in August 1978, the protestant 'blue' team picked up on how a body changes colour in death, and, using the tune of a Boney M chart hit, "Brown girl in the ring" appropriated the tune, and changing the lyrics sang, Pope Pauls turning blue, tralalalala. There is a lot wrong with this, aren't we supposed to uphold some sanctity in death? At the same time the cleverness and quick thinking to come up with such a retort wasn't lost on me at 11 years of age—in fact, the stories live with me.

Sadly, I also witnessed, at times, behaviour between rival supporters which was aggressive and violent. During one local derby, I became transfixed by the number of stretchers taking injured fans away from skirmishes during the match. It seemed as if local derbys were little more than an occasion for two groups of angry men to kick hell out of each other. Awareness of this volatile situation led my father, after one England versus Scotland match in Glasgow, where Scotland were beaten by England 5–0, to whisper to me as we left the stadium, "If anyone says anything to you, just say," he then

changed to a Scottish accent before delivering *ochay* in recognition of how any English person could stand out by their accent and be recognised, and therefore, stand-in as a vessle for hate within an angry crown looking to vent emotions and fists following their loss.

However dark, sick or funny, these issues might be, songs, the singing back and forth between fans, are a very typical part of British football. They have been a way fans (and particularly groups of men) can bind and band together. But, additionally, they provide an example of quick wittedness and creativity that also lies behind the flag waving, and alongside aggression and violence, the lyrical genius provides an avenue to impress each other with irony and humour.

On another occasion, my dad took me to watch Liverpool, who were playing locally. As they ran onto the pitch one set of fans chanted: "You can have him we don't want him he's too slow for us" Their song was referring to a player recently transferred to Liverpool. The match didn't go as these fans had hoped, and Liverpool's new signing scored a hat trick. As the third ball rammed past the keeper, the Liverpool fans had something to sing back to the opposing fans earlier retort of the player being old. "Thank you very much for Alun Evans thankyou very much thank you very very very much" an appropriation of 1970s hit "Thank you very much" recorded by a band called "The Scaffold."

In the city of Liverpool, and not just on the football terraces, humour infuses life. At the supermarket checkout, at the bus stop, at the doctors surgery, at the food bank, people going about their daily business are often very funny, and it's something you can't help but notice.

Perhaps the 'blarney' and 'crack' was influenced by the high number of Irish immigrants who escaped to Liverpool during the Great Famine between 1845 and 1849, or at other times due to economic or political strife, severe poverty and starvation. Its impossible to say for sure how the huge number of Irish immigrants to Liverpool shaped the city. By 1851 20% of the Liverpool population was reportedly Irish and today it has been estimated that 75% of families in Liverpool have Irish ancestry (Bowery, 2019).

The above provides a backdrop, reflecting the uncanny knack of football fans to spontaneously appropriate whatever songs are available, making them their own and rewriting the lyrics to suit the occasion, but in doing so, to join their voices together.

A Visit to Anfield

I don't know if it was the influence of my family being Irish immigrants, or if it was because I liked the funny songs and singing; it may even have been the blue eyed blond who scored for Liverpool, but whatever it was, I adopted the team—Liverpool became *my* team.

When my father had business trips, he'd often take us, (my mum, younger sister and I) when he took us with him to Liverpool one winter, I pestered him to take me to Anfield, the home of Liverpool football club.

Shy, insecure, and lacking confidence, I wasn't at all sure what to do when we got there. I'm guessing my dad could see all this evolve but didn't feel a need to 'take over,' or be pushy in any way. It was a Sunday morning, the merchandise store was closed, there were no players training and my father would have known all this, that any positive outcome would be unlikely. Still, he drove us there, perhaps he believed in miracles. As we pulled into the car park, we could only see one person. A man in his fifties, bent over slowly unpacking things from the boot of a car.

"Go over and ask him if you can buy a programme" my dad suggested, giving no indication that he would be doing anything to facilitate things; this was my thing and (I guess) he thought I needed to take charge. With a huge amount of insecurity, I did what was suggested, without question, I walked over and asked,

"Excuse me, can I buy a programme?"

While I didn't know it at the time, and neither did he, the man, Jo Fagen, would in a few years be catapulted into the club manager's role and become the first manager in England to win the Treble, three major titles in 1 year. At the time, however, he was one of a group of coaches called the 'boot room boys'. The name had come from the time when Bill Shankly first went to Liverpool as manager in the early 1960s and converted a 12 foot square old store room into an inner sanctum—a meeting place for him and his coaches. It had no natural light, smelt of linament, and had old leather boots hanging from pegs on the wall. Despite this, it became a place steeped in "mystery, mythology and intrigue" (Hooton, 2018). This protected space allowed half a dozen men who shared common goals and values, who lived and breathed football, to analyse performances and players, to discuss strategy, select or deselect players. It formed a base from which to build what has been called the most successful British football club in Europe in the 20th Century. The boot room boys have become legendary in British football, writes Hooton (2018), "Back in those days football was a working-class game and the boot room boys came from solid working-class backgrounds" yet, he goes on to say "it was never about the place, but rather the development of unique bonds between a small group of men."

Jo Fagan, I've learned more recently, despite being one of the most successful managers ever, shunned the limelight. When we met, I at 13 years of age, had no idea why, when asked by a little girl, out of place, alone in a car park, if she could buy a programme, he did something rather magical. I don't know if he'd seen my father, mother and sister looking on from the car. I don't even know if my father watched to see what happened. I don't know whether Jo Fagan wondered where I was from, as my accent was clearly not from 'round there,' or if he had a nurturing sensibility to develop and support youngsters. We can never know, but what I do know is, he took me into the main building, gave me a genuine club football shirt with a number five on the back. From another cupboard he produced a stack of programmes and memorabilia, with all the players autographs on, then he asked:

'Would you like to see the trophy room?"

He then took me on a grand tour of the club, through the board room, across the terraces, into another room filled with museum styled cabinets housing masses of silver

cups and trophies adorned with red and white ribbons spilling from the handles. I followed on, rather speechless, a little puppy getting treats, my arms struggling to keep hold of the gifts.

And for many years I stayed a faithful fan, I put the pictures and football shirt on my bedroom walls, I learned all the player's names and watched every match available on TV or listened on the radio. When I pestered my father to take me to the football, it was to watch Liverpool play matches. I cried when Liverpool lost, and rejoiced when they won. I lived, breathed and talked football. I can still tell you the telephone number of the club, and the name of every player on the FA Cup winning team, Ray Clemence in goal, Phil Neal, Alec Lindsey, Peter Cormack Ian Callaghan, Steve Highway, Brain Hall, Tommy Smith, Emlyn Hughes, John Toshack, Kevin Keegan, Phil Thompson and Larry Lloyd. Whether the club won or lost, what is tattooed in my memory was the response of the fans to their heroes, and the singing of "*You'll never walk alone*" a message, a promise, an outstretched hand.

In my body, bones, and blood, with tears running down my cheeks, I would join in the song.

Walk on, walk on

With hope in your heart

And you'll never walk alone

You'll never walk alone

Closing the Chapter

When my father died in 1982 at the age of 52, a chapter of my life was closed. Up to this point in my life, he had been my best friend. From Scotland, where he worked when he telephoned home each night, we talked about the latest results and transfers, the next matches, and team selection. When he was home, we'd sit and watch the games on TV, or play football in the garden and listen on the radio. And at 17, when he suggested I start playing golf with a view to becoming a professional, it opened up another avenue for us to do things together, to share passions. Life wasn't the same after his death, and the thought of going alone to the terraces seemed pointless. Who would there be to laugh with, share jokes with, notice the banter, create and retell stories. It wasn't a sudden end, more like blood draining from life. I would possibly still be described by others as "mad about football." But, bit by bit, I was slipping away from the football shore. However, it was two football disasters which cut the anchor.

Three years after my father's death, at the Heysel stadium where Liverpool were due to play Juventus in the European Cup Final in Belgium, 40 fans were killed and 600 injured after a wall collapsed on the terraces. After the death of my father, I think I became somewhat de-sensitised, my world shrank, I didn't want to answer questions. However, when I heard the news of people losing their life at a football match, of leaving

families, mums, dads, sisters and brothers, full of excitement to watch the match and never coming home again, it seemed to touch a nerve that was already raw. I was devastated, *for them* and had began to understand grief, and experienced a deeper level of empathy.

Four years later, on the April 15, 1989 at the Hillsborough stadium, in Sheffield nearly 100 fans were killed and 800 injured in a crush that two inquests have recently showed was due to gross negligence by the police, the stadium and emergency services. I don't remember watching much football after this date. Somehow, the seduction had ended. And not only football. For many years following my PhD I have been detached from sport in general, after learning through my research about too many athletes' experiences of trauma and mental health problems and sexual abuse scandals.

But for the Song

I can't begin to cover 40 years of meaning and memory in a paragraph. But my interest in sport, or awareness of the 'good things' it can bring, for the best part nearly 20 years, has been zero. Then in 2012, a news report caught my ear as they described a young footballer, 23 year old Fabrice Muamba, who'd experienced a cardiac arrest during an FA Cup quarter-final football match between Bolton Wanderers and Tottenham. It was reported in most of the national news media and on television, and became a story of unexpected survival with electric shock treatment on the pitch, in the ambulance and in hospital. But this wasn't the 'thing' that provoked the spark for me to think about football again. Nor was it the series of good fortune that followed Muamba after the cardiac arrest, for example, a cardiologist being in the stand, who dashed down to help, promptly taking responsibility for the emergency plans of the ambulance, so that the player was diverted to his specialist chest hospital where his crew and special equipment saved the players life. Rather, what moved me was how 'football' responded.

The following extracts from Kenmare (2012) provide a flavour of what happened:

> "The atmosphere suddenly changed from a football game, where people were chanting, to complete silence." "You could hear the roar start when the doctor started pushing on his chest. It kept getting louder and louder. I've never seen anything like it."…"It went from a football game to willing a man to get through. All the lads didn't know what to do. I remember there were a few lads crying as well."

In the days and weeks that followed, irrespective of the club allegiance or loyalties, 'get well soon' messages abounded, players from rival teams visited the hospital, funds were set up. Flowers, banners, flags and messages filled the parking spaces and gates of the club, a spirit of compassion, of love and resonance seemed to engulf football, and "you'll never walk alone" seemed to speak up, remember me? Its not *all* bad.

I still can't say I am particularly interested in football, but these and numerous other similar events over the past decade, have reminded me of the unique bonds that exist and can be harnessed and flourish in sport. I am reminded of care that can be infectious, and

perhaps like Mandela, I should remember and balance this good, and the possibilities of communicating through songs, something life giving, even at football matches still exists.

You'll Never Walk Alone

When you walk through a storm

Hold your head up high

And don't be afraid of the dark

At the end of a storm

There's a golden sky

And the sweet silver song of a lark

Walk on through the wind

Walk on through the rain

Though your dreams be tossed and blown

Walk on, walk on

With hope in your heart

And you'll never walk alone

You'll never walk alone

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Kitrina Douglas https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1481-9642

References

Bowery, L. (2019). "How liverpool's Irish migrants helped shape the city". Signature's Liverpool. https://signaturesliverpool.co.uk/blog/how-liverpools-irish-migrants-helped-shape-the-city/ (Accessed, 4 July 2021).

Hotoon, P. (2018). *The boot room boys: The unseen story of anfield's conquering heroes*. Virgin Books.

Kenmare, J. (2012). *Fabrice muamba meets the doctor who helped save his life NineYears on*. SportBible.org. https://www.sportbible.com/football/news-reactions-fabrice-muamba-meets-doctor-who-helped-save-his-life-nine-years-on-20210310.

Mandela, N (2000). *Speech at the inaugural "Laureus world sports awards"*. globalgoals.org. https://www.globalgoals.org/news/sport-for-development-and-peace.