

To What Extent is Football Still a Poor Man's Game?

Arhaan Mukherjee Saha

Grade 11 Student at Vasant Valley School, Delhi, India.
N-8, 3rd Floor, Panchsheel Park, Behind Panchsheel Club, New Delhi-110017

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ABSTRACT

Football is a sport which is played and watched by millions and millions of people worldwide. However, the game has progressed a lot since its introduction wherein it was once recognized as a poor man's game and now runs as a corporation fuelled by wealth and money. For example, in the Premier League alone this year, the clubs spent a total of 1.9 billion pounds. In 1999 they spent a total of 220 million Pounds. This shows the stark difference and the sudden increase in expenditure. This paper aims to unfold how the sport began, and the certain factors which influenced the change in the game, making it a game which is mainly dominated by businessmen and billionaires. The latter half of this paper focuses on how even though the bigger leagues may be dominated by these mega tycoons of business, the game still belongs to the people and benefits them.

Keywords: Football, poor man's game, footballer, people's sport

INTRODUCTION

For the longest time football was considered the 'people's sport' - is this still reflective of reality?

If we trace it back to its origins, football was played by miners, labourers, and dock workers. It was illegal to even pay for players to play, in a ruling by the FA. Only in 1885, it was legalized for football players to be paid (Simkin, 2014). Ever since then, football has become the most popular sport on the planet and has arguably changed from being an accessible game to one in which money takes precedence. For

example, the average wage of a Premier League footballer is just over 60,000 pounds per week. That amounts to a little more than 3 million pounds per year. The average salary of a nurse is a little over 25,000 pounds every year (McCarry, 2015). The amount of money that is thrown around in the football industry is unfathomable.

So, can we really consider football a poor man's game? One could argue that even though the professional game may only belong to the upper classes, the game still connects people of all different cultures, ethnicities and financial statuses. For example, in Brazil, football is often the only thing which brings happiness to young kids. Children from the Favelas of Rio De Janeiro spend hours just kicking the ball around with their friends. Not only does football enhance one's life, but it also keeps kids off the streets and away from things they shouldn't be exposed to at a young age. You can create friendships with football. For most kids, all they need is a ball and they can entertain themselves for hours. This all indicates that football is the people's game.

However, teams at the professional level spend ridiculous amounts of money on bringing the best players to their teams. Nowadays, players care more about money than the actual game. Furthermore, the level of foreign investment and ownership in football teams comes with hefty price tags and has been on the rise for many years. In light of this, the research paper aims to argue whether football can still be considered a poor man's sport or not. In

order to do this, the research question answered is 'To what extent is football still a poor man's game?'

The origin and history of football

The first-ever World Cup was held in 1930. It hosted just 13 teams. That amount has now grown to 32 teams as the most prestigious tournament in sport reaches its 100th anniversary (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). But what were the true origins of this great sport, before it was played on such an elevated platform?

There are records from back in the 3rd Century BC, when China played a game similar to football, as described in the manuals. During the Han Dynasty (206BC – AD220) a game called cuju, or kick-ball, became increasingly popularized. FIFA has officially acknowledged its status as the "very earliest form of the game for which there is scientific evidence", and the game certainly has aspects of football a part of it (FIFA Museum, 2022). The sport began to be played in a more organised fashion in England in 1863. As the rules were still being worked out, it took the English Football Organization or the (FA) almost 9 years to start the FA Cup and the first championship began in 1888. This also explains why the history of football in India can be traced back to the pre-independent period when the British people brought the game to the country. For example, in India, the first football game was organized between 'Calcutta Club of Civilians' and the 'Gentlemen of Barrackpore', in 1854 (Sengupta, 2019).

In England, at first, the game was played mainly by just the military. However, soon, the obsession over the game spread like wildfire. Clubs started being set up, official rules and tournaments began being organized and players began to become more skilled at this unheard sport. It began being played in public schools and universities. However, this is just in the UK (Johnson, 2017). The spread of the sport into other countries was a very slow

process. The Netherlands and Denmark formed their own football associations in 1889, followed by New Zealand in 1891, Argentina in 1893, and Chile, Switzerland and Belgium in 1895. Italy was next, forming its association in 1898. Behind it was Germany and Uruguay in 1900. The next decade would see Hungary and Finland form an association as well. FIFA, or Federations de International Futbol Association, was only founded in 1904 and the countries which founded the association were Belgium, France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Surprisingly, England was not part of the founding members, but they had formed their own association much earlier.

Italy is often miscredited with the innovation of creating the beautiful game. In Italy, a game called Calcio was very popular, but it was highly dependent on arms which is completely against the philosophy of the sport. Calcio today translates directly to football in Italian, with its role in the development of the sport certainly crucial. Yet Calcio's own existence was reliant on the Roman game which preceded it. Similarly, Harpastum was reliant on the Greek game Episkyros for inspiration (Rice-Coates, 2019). The links are clear; each game, no matter how fundamental, has led to the development of a new form of football. Throw in the ancient games of the Far East and Australia, though not direct ancestors of football and the significance of these historical pastimes become even greater. All across the globe and for thousands of years, primitive cultures have engaged in games with similarities to modern football.

From poverty to power: an overview of some of the biggest football players

Often when we see the big stars of famous football clubs like Manchester United, Inter Milan, Manchester City etc, we are used to looking at the players as global superstars. They are paid enormous wages, and own mansions, sports cars and expensive watches. However, many of those

footballers have worked their way up, from rags to riches. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo used to sweep the streets of Lisbon at a very young age (The Strive Team, 2022). Mohammed Salah of Liverpool said in an interview that he would travel 4 hours for 5 days a week to reach training. Many of these footballers could not afford expensive shoes, training or even transport to reach games (FootyFacts, 2021). But because they had a dream, they were able to work their way towards success and are now able to provide a steady lifestyle for themselves, and even for their parents who supported them for many years.

A touching story comes from Brazil. It is about a young boy called Adriano. Adriano was always interested in football and would play it in the streets as a kid. He used to play barefoot, and he began to play for the community team of that region. Football was his only talent as a child, so it was natural for him to pursue it. His dream was to become rich and own a big car. His family assisted him a lot. Back then, Adriano had the support of everyone at home who sacrificed themselves so that he could someday become a footballer. Players like Antony and Gabriel Jesus have also come from the Favelas in Brazil, which has now become a hub for new and upcoming talents of Brazil.

Another incredible comeback story is about England striker Jamie Vardy. Although most footballers start their professional careers at a very young age, Vardy played non-league football with Halifax Town in England and worked as Carbon Fibre Technician during nights to make ends meet at age 22. He moved on to Fleetwood, where his goalscoring exploits caught the attention of then-Championship side Leicester City. The Foxes dished out £1 million - a record for a non-league player - in 2012 to land Vardy. Jamie Vardy has since gone on to be one of the heroes of Leicester City's improbable 2015-16 title win and is one of the most dangerous attackers in world football. From this story, we can tell that not only did Vardy come

from a very poor background, but he also started his football career very late and had to work different jobs to be able to survive. Ronaldo Nazario is often considered one of the greatest players to ever play the game. He has won honours like the World Cup and the Ballon d'Or. However, he was born into a very poor family and his parents could not even afford to send him to school. But, once the Dutch Club PSV spotted him, he was signed and then went on to play for Barcelona, Real Madrid, and Inter. He is a role model to all young children in Brazil, who wish to make it out of their poverty and bring prosperity and success to their families.

Overall, it is evident that football, which originated as a game for the 'poor', did in fact allow for some of the biggest names in the sports industry to be scouted. By being enabled to play football, may it be on the most undeveloped of lands, many individuals belonging to the poorer sections of society have benefited as the sport keeps them occupied and away from the dangers of the real world. Football also keeps them physically active and is good for their development as a growing child. It grows a sense of competitiveness within children, and they learn to work hard from a young age. Lastly, it instils certain respect and sportsmanship in them from a young age and teaches them certain values about how to treat life.

Is football still a poor man's game?

Football is a game where millions and millions of dollars are thrown around. The highest transfer fee paid for a football player is nearly 250 million Euros. Footballers are paid millions annually, not only for their football but through sponsorship deals etc. But how did such a simple game turn into a game driven by money? The first ever recorded transfer fee was in 1893 when Jack Southworth transferred from Blackburn Rovers to Everton for 400 pounds. This was believed to be the first time money exchanged hands for a football player. Soon, the FA or the Football Association in

England imposed the law that a player is tied to a team while playing for them and cannot leave the club without the club's permission. This is perceived to be the first idea of a contract, where players are bound to a team for a certain period of time. Players began earning weekly wages for playing, and the better players even earned up to 10 pounds weekly. However, most players were in other jobs, so nobody depended on football for a living. In 1908, the FA made a regulation that the highest a team could pay for a player is 350 pounds. However, clubs worked around this by including worse players in a transfer offer, to reach the valuation of a player above 350 pounds. In October 1919, Frank Barson transferred to Aston Villa for 2,850 pounds, breaking the British transfer record. Clubs slowly began paying more and more for players (Simkin, 1997). In the 1970s, Kevin Keegan moved to Hamburger SV for 500,000 pounds. Before moving to the Germans, Keegan earned 12000 pounds annually. After moving to the German giants, he earned 250,000 pounds annually. This shows how slowly teams began paying hundreds of pounds to thousands of pounds (Ginnel, 2014). Then in 1996, Alan Shearer joined his boyhood club Newcastle United for 15 million pounds. This shattered the British transfer record fee. He was being pursued by the two top teams in England, Newcastle (TransferMarkt Team, n.d.) and Manchester United. This shows how big teams forked out millions to get the best players.

The transfer which completely changed football was Luis Figo from Barcelona to Real Madrid. Barcelona and Real Madrid were bitter rivals and Luis Figo was the star of Barcelona's team. He signed for Real Madrid for 62 million euros. Figo's teammates were caught off guard and did not expect him to leave. The entire summer, Figo denied rumours of leaving Barcelona despite clashes between him and the board over his contract. Rumours were flying within the Real Madrid camp, which was in the midst of presidential elections, that new

Presidential candidate Florentino Perez was on the verge of signing the Portuguese superstar. Many believed it was unthinkable for Figo to leave Barcelona, but money drew one of the best players away from Barcelona (The Figo Affair: The Transfer that changed Football, 2022).

In 2010, Cristiano Ronaldo moved from Manchester United to Real Madrid for 94 million Euros. Then in 2012, Gareth Bale moved from Spurs to Real Madrid for 101 million Euros (Kerkdijk, n.d.). Real Madrid spent billions on building a super team which won them 5 champions league titles from 2014-2022. Manchester City was a relegation club from 1992-2008. After receiving an influx of billions of pounds from Saudi Arabia they began winning titles and competing for trophies that they would not have had a chance to win earlier. This proves the point that football has become a game driven by money, where money buys success more than anything.

Why access to football remains important

It is well established now that football is a business in which only tycoons with millions and millions of dollars can dabble. It is viewed from the outside world as an interconnected web of overpriced expensive assets being traded to create what is considered the most profitable organisation. This phenomenon is not only singular to football, as often the same concept is adopted in the National Football League, National Basketball Association and Major Baseball League. However, the impact football has on others is second to none. Football reaches out to everybody who interacts with it - whether it is watching football from the comfort of your home, or interacting with other fans in stadiums, whether it be playing the sport, with your friends or in an organised league. The beautiful game has the ability to completely transform the life of a person. Therefore, the other side of the argument with regard to the wealth and money generated in the world of football is all the good that is being done with it. This is seen most prominently in the

case of the Premier League as evidenced in the examples below.

There are many people who suffer from conditions which cause them to live their life differently than others. Acknowledging this, the Premier League attempts to decrease the burden on these children and their families by constantly contributing to the NHS in the United Kingdom, making sure that enough funds are raised for children with operations which are needed (Premier League, 2020). Furthermore, Marcus Rashford, an England international and Manchester United star player, campaigned against the UK government and successfully raised enough money to feed 1.3 million starving children across the UK, for which he was awarded an MBE. Troy Deeney, the ex-Watford captain, has started to provide money for children with learning disabilities and lifelong diseases. He is raising funds to build a centre near his home. Raheem Sterling has always been vocal about the background which he came from, speaking out about the sacrifices his family made for him to be able to make it as a professional footballer. He donated money to charities and paid for 500 children to watch the FA Cup semi-final in 2019 (BBC News, 2020).

The Premier League charitable fund was formed in 2010. The main goals of the fund are to build stronger communities where everybody is able to achieve and help create personal relationships and communication networks. The PLCF develops programmes and integrates them with Club Community Organisations and invests in infrastructure and provides quality programmes to enhance the development of children (Premier League, 2022). For example, Premier League Kicks is one of the well-established community programmes using the reach and appeal of the Premier League and its network of professional football clubs to regularly engage children and young people of all backgrounds and abilities in football, sport and personal development. Moreover, Premier League Inspires is a joint programme between the

Premier League, the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) and the Prince's Trust and uses the appeal of football to help children and young people aged 11-25 to fulfil their potential (Premier League, 2022).

Apart from involvement with young children, the Premier League has a strict anti-racism policy. The No Room for Racism campaign is still going strong with players taking a knee before games as a stand against racism. Players like Wilfred Zaha and Raheem Sterling have been incredibly vocal regarding these issues which still exist on a day-to-day basis, but the Premier League has been working for a while to make the league incredibly inclusive. The Premier League also launched its Rainbow Laces programme, in which they showed their support for the LGBTQ+ community, doing programmes with players and LGBTQ fans of the teams. Although there are no openly gay footballers in Europe at the moment, an inclusive space has been created for them to be accepted for who they are. (BBC News, 2020)

This shows how the world of football has evolved to be accepting and allow all types of people associated with the sport to be themselves.

CONCLUSION

So, the question remains; is Football still a poor man's game and to what extent?

By tracing back to the origins of football, and its humble beginnings, it is possible to identify at which point football transitioned from the game of the people to a sport dominated by rich businessmen looking to make profits. Soon after teams began playing in competitive games, the demand for players who would help them succeed naturally rose tenfold. The aforementioned led to players gradually being paid extortionate amounts of money to play the sport, and the transition between how much they were paid in the early 20th century to the early 21st century is shocking.

However, that being said, it must be acknowledged that the influence of the beautiful game on the poorer, more marginalised section of our communities is still very much present. The game has an incredibly positive impact on many people other than being a great mode of distraction from the struggles people may face in their everyday lives. Therefore, whilst the game may not be the 'poor man's game' anymore, it is still most definitely the people's game and one in which the love that people share for it proves to be a uniting factor which binds them together from complete opposites of the world and society.

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