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The English Primeirship: My Introduction to the Beautiful Game In England

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Outlined on a blue-gray October sky, or was it a September sky? Actually it was both and it was football. The four horsemen of Notre Dame were nowhere to be seen nor was Grantland Rice. It was English Premiership football and now after attending two games and watching others on television I am beginning to get a feel for this sport that makes Americans yawn and the world go into a frenzy.

In September we joined Alan Metcalfe to make our appointed pilgrimage to the Stadium of Light and see the Sunderland Black Cats in action against Fulham. Last weekend, courtesy of Chuck Korr, we were guests in the Director's Box at Upton Park to watch West Ham United do battle with Birmingham City. Two different venues and in two very different circumstances with two struggling teams.

At Sunderland the day was reminiscent of a fall Saturday at most any college football game. We partook in Alan's gameday ritual that began with lunch and a few pints at The Roker Arms, a seaside pub, where we met his friend Dave. Parking about a half-mile away we walked to stadium with a large number of people wearing the red and white of the home side. Pre-game excitement was in the air; old friends greeted one another, much like any game in the United States.

That changed when we approached the Stadium of Light. The numbers of police on foot, on horseback, and in hovering helicopters above the neighborhood were a reminder of the security issues that have plagued English football over the past several years. The same was true at West Ham. I haven't seen this many police since the days of civil rights marches and anti-war demonstrations.

Inside both stadia the crowd was buzzing. Visiting fans are all assigned to one area of the stadium and they are isolated by police from the rest of the crowd, another legacy of hooliganism.

Sunderland took the field to the sounds of Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet played on a speaker system that would explode if it had been one decibel higher. The vibration in the speakers must take them close to the shattering point.

The assault on the ears exceeded most rock concerts. The crowd exploded.

Then the game began and reality settled in by late in the first half. This will be recorded as the worst game ever played at the new Stadium of Light, and indeed it must be one of the worst in the long history of Sunderland football. I do not explore this subject very far with Alan as he is already in sufficient pain.

Two other things are quite striking. Sitting behind us with his father is a small boy no more than eight years old. The boy asks many questions about the game and the level of complexity in the questioning is quite remarkable. Then as the game moves into its later stages and Sunderland sinks into a catatonic state, the crowd begins to leave. As they do the fans stop in front of us to shout down to the television and radio commentators articulating their critiques of the performance of the players and their assessment of Sunderland's beleaguered manager who was sacked yesterday. The creativity of the English language is taken to new levels. The game ends in a chorus of booing and obscenity. There is no joy in Wearside tonight.

At West Ham it is a similar scene as we arrive by train with thousands of others many in the "wine and powder blue" of the home side. After picking up our tickets we are directed to a suite where food and an open bar are available. Here a number of guests mingle, enjoy and bite and a pint, and watch the television showing the Sky Sports network.

Then we go up into the box and after a brief blast of Prokofiev the crowd sings the West Ham song. The Birmingham City crowd is on one end of the stands cordoned off by police. They too are highly animated and very loud. They will have a good day, as they are on the winning side of a 2-1 game.

The level of play, at least for the first half is extremely high. Great intensity, excellent passing, marvelous footwork and play execution reveals why this game has captured the hearts of so many around the world. To me it has much of the same appeal as hockey with its comparable footwork and passing, albeit on a different surface.

The West Ham fans send their team off with a chorus of boos similar to that at Sunderland. In the hospitality room after the game it is difficult to read the outcome from the mood of the faithful.

After the crowd cleared from around the stadium we moved out toward the train. Here we got one more look at security. The crowd was piled up in the street and confronted by police on foot and on horseback in big numbers and some having attack dogs in hand. I assumed there had been some sort of trouble. There was not. Amazingly the London Underground does not put on extra trains to handle gameday crowds and so the police were controlling access to the station. It was an incident waiting to happen.

I was struck by the provocative character of the police presence and wonder if cordoning off the train station and using attack dogs for potential crowd control was really necessary or indeed wise. Clearly someone thought it was.

Both football Saturdays were interesting and the view from the Director's Box is certainly different from that in the stands although it is clear that all fans are intensely involved in the game, all fancy themselves coaches as well as referees, and the incessant music of American stadia is happily absent.

And for all it is an expression of one sense of community.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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