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Changes for Manchester United

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Changes for Manchester United
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There is nothing more delightful for an American of a certain perverse persuasion than to watch the Brits get their knickers all twisted up over something as silly as the sale of Manchester United to some little billionaire twit from the dismal swamps of Florida. It has been a wonderful several weeks to watch the spectacle of hysteria over such a trivial matter as this.

I am not sure that there was this much fuss over the relocation of London Bridge to the American desert or the Queen Mary to Southern California's Pacific coast. There certainly wasn't this much fuss when the Americans commandeered the British colonial empire after World War II, and then went on to create the myth of "the special relationship." That latter, of course, has led to the current status of Tony Blair as Bush's poodle.

But I digress.

The entire Manchester United business has been extremely entertaining. Take for example the quaint notion of a "football club." It seems so nineteenth century, the British century. A club? Please. These little community football clubs have morphed into multimillion dollar businesses with a global profile. They are part of the world of stock exchanges and brokers, and thereby public entities. This is how, of course, they became exposed to being bought up by some crass colonial in the first place.

The football club is no longer a place where you go for a pint or two and get a whiff of testosterone in the gloaming, nor even an evening of sporting conversation over whiskey and cigars. No, it's about money, money, and more money. It's about international marketing schemes in consort with the New York Yankees. It's about selling all that Red Devil merchandise across the length and breadth of the globe.

So what can United supporters expect from the Glazers, father and sons. If the Tampa Bay Buc history offers any guide they can expect a number of unpleasant experiences. First they will be dazzled by the arrogance of Malcolm and his boys. Not to say that arrogance is always a bad thing. Most sports fans exhibit a bit of this over their teams, and indeed Manchester United fans

seem to be in possession of a reasonable amount of this unattractive human personality trait. A tradition of winning seems to breed arrogance. So the Glazers could in fact fit right in, if given half-a-chance.

Second, you can expect to be extorted for a certain amount of treasure. Not of course to the point of looting and pillaging, but just some friendly extortion. Think New Trafford.

American sports owners are currently obsessed with the idea that any sports stadium over ten years old is out of date. New Trafford will be quite attractive. It will give new expression to the English class system, based on the American measures of wealth rather than breeding. This will be achieved at little or no cost to the Glazers, because the Glazers understand a fundamental principle of American business: "It is always better to invest other people's money, rather than your own." That means the people who set the council taxes in Manchester better get ready to raise the rates. Certainly no one would want to contemplate the notion of Manchester United of Bury playing at the New Old Trafford just a wee bit north up the M66. Of course it might not be Old Trafford or even new old Trafford. It could be Sony/BMW/Tesco Stadium.

Five years after the stadium was built in Tampa the value of the Tampa Bay Bucs had increased from \$192M to \$532M. Although the stadium was heavily financed by the taxpayers, the profits all went to the Glazers. The area tax burden was spread over thirty years and the stadium was bundled with basic social services to make the tax more palatable. It will result in only six percent of the \$2.7B in projected taxes going to the Glazers, a small price to pay for local glory and Glazer profits. Will Manchester be expected to do anything less?

Third, because the Glazers operate by the American value system, you can expect that tradition will no longer have a place at Old or New Trafford. Americans believe in private property, and what that means to the American rich is that because they own something they can do whatever they damn well please with it. The public has no say in these matters. Football club? What club? The Glazers now own the place. Get out of the way!

So these are a few of the charms that the Glazers bring to the table.

United fans also seem concerned that Malcolm Glazer has never been to a "proper football match." True enough, but we hear that

one of the Glazer boys is a big Man United fan. So lighten up, he no doubt understands this game better than anyone in your old and tired organization. As for Sir Alex and his future, I wouldn't be too concerned. Once the Glazers understand that Sir Alex has royal cache, they will be duly impressed. The American rich have always fawned over anything connected in even the most remote fashion to the royal family. The Glazers may even want to buy a title of two for their family heritage.

Another amusing aspect of the ruckus is how the American sporting press has reported the story. Focusing on the fact the Glazers took the Tampa Bay Bucs from a dismal state to a Super Bowl victory, American sports broadcasters have told Man United fans that Glazer will turn them into a winner and make United a worldwide force in sport. Luckily not much local American television makes it across the Atlantic.

There is really only one troubling aspect to this entire business as seen from this side of the Atlantic. Why is it that some quiet billionaire from the U.S. seems to have generated such venom from the English, while the crass and flamboyant nouveau riche oil billionaire from Russia has been such a hit with the Chelsea fans? Could we be looking at some expression of anti-Americanism? Is it just too much for the former empire to acknowledge the power and wealth of its successor? Is that what all the fuss is really about?

Troubling thoughts, these. Could even endanger that special relationship.

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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