

At any Price by Christoph Biermann

Sample Translation by Raphael Honigstein

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Introduction

On April 18 2021, a Sunday, the history of football came to an end. It had only been a rumour in the afternoon, but by the evening, more and more clubs confirmed that they would be playing in a new competition they called the “Super League”. Among them were the biggest and most legendary clubs of European football: Real Madrid, Barcelona, Atlético Madrid, Juventus, AC Milan and Inter as well as six English sides — Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur. They announced their withdrawal from the Champions League for the following season and invited five more clubs to join their new league. US bank JPMorgan Chase were to bankroll the project to the tune of \$3.5b.

What made the idea truly outrageous was its closed-shop nature. Clubs didn’t gain access to the Super League by virtue of performances but self-appointment, based purely on the strength of their brands. Sides who weren’t “super” enough were excluded. Not for the first time, it felt as if football had reached the end of the road.

On December 2 2010, FIFA-president Joseph S. Blatter had opened an envelope, removed a card and read out “Qatar”. The 2022 World Cup had been awarded to a small Gulf emirate that had never taken part in the competition before. Rich in natural gas, Qatar had in fact bought the tournament as subsequent revelations showed. What’s more, the World Cup

had to be moved to November/December for the first time ever to accommodate the hosts. In summer, it would have been far too hot.

Awarding the World Cup to Qatar and the founding of the Super League were football's equivalents of Donald Trump's election for president and Great Britain's Brexit — hugely influential monstrosities that strengthened the suspicion that something had gone fundamentally wrong.

In the case of the Super League, that sentiment led to huge protests by supporters of the clubs that wanted to play in their own exclusive competition. Fans of Chelsea demonstrated outside Stamford Bridge the next day, they blocked the home team's bus until club official Petr Cech came out to talk to them. Supporters of Arsenal and Tottenham laid siege to their clubs' headquarters, and protest banners were put up outside Anfield in Liverpool. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it wasn't right that the participant clubs "should be somehow dislocated from their home towns, home cities, taken and turned into international brands and commodities, just circulate the planet propelled by the billions of banks without any reference to fans and those who have loved them all their lives." On top of that, he threatened to drop "a legislative bomb" on football's secessionists.

European federation UEFA also pledged maximum resistance, while Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund and Paris Saint-Germain refused to join the new league. One Super League club after another buckled under public pressure and withdrew their participation until only Real Madrid, Barcelona and

Juventus were left to defend their project. A mere 48 hours after it had been founded, the Super League was dead again.

“Unlike the laws of physics, which are free of inconsistencies, every man-made order is packed with internal contradictions,” historian Yuval Harari writes in “Sapiens: A brief history of mankind”. That’s true of football, too. The Super League made many contradictions visible, it showed that sporting, economic, cultural and political concerns were inextricably intertwined. In the quest for a functioning business model, sporting principles had been jettisoned and the very cultural connections that had made football popular and relevant in the first place had been deliberately broken. Not for the first time in the era of modern football, things had become very confused.

The history of football has seen different phases and eras since the Laws of the Game were first codified in 1863. The current era is that of modern football. It began in reaction to a deep seated crisis during which football was transformed to the extent of being unrecognisable. 1992 proved a watershed: a number of changes happened at the same time and came to be decisive drivers of the modernisation process. The Champions League was founded that year, a tournament that would become one of the most economically successful products in global sports. In England, the Premier League superseded the old First Division and developed into the leading national league in football world-wide. The success of the two new competitions was made possible by a new TV market, whose largely uninterrupted boom

delivered continuously rising income. In Germany, new commercial station Sat1 started broadcasting match highlights and declared: “The old Bundesliga is dead”. The game itself was altered drastically due to a rule change — the back pass rule contributed to the game speeding up and making football more interesting. And 1992 also saw the publication of “Fever Pitch” by Nick Hornby, a book that pioneered the exploration of football supporters’ emotional landscape.

There are two competing narratives for the story of football in the last three decades. One tells of a global boom and a series of golden years, the sporting and cultural heyday of the game, underpinned by a fascinating economic upturn. Never before had football brought in that much money, deliver such high quality performances and produce relentless in-depth debate. Football has become the most successful sport globally, number one in most countries and on nearly all continents.

But at the same time, its story is being told as one of decline, of estrangement and a cultural sell-out. To many supporters, modern football is a decidedly negative term, a provocation even. It defines a game that has elevated economic concerns beyond sporting values and the feelings of fans, a game that’s become predominately a TV product, with rising ticket prices and the annoying necessity of having to sign up to a variety of channels if one wants to follow the entirety of any competition. Modern football is also about the continuous redistribution of money from smaller to bigger clubs and about

competitions that have become more and more dysfunctional. “People go to football because they don’t know what the result will be,” Sepp Herberger, the World Cup-winning coach of West Germany in 1954 once said. These days, people still can’t be quite sure how any given game might finish, but they do so knowing that a handful of clubs monopolise sporting success as they’ve never done before in the history of the game.

“The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk,” the famous aphorism of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel goes. Philosophers begin their work once reality has taken shape. The same is true of historians: they write about history once history has become apparent and describable.

If that’s the case with the era of modern football might still be debatable but its dawn looms already. In the last three decades, the contradictions within the football system have become so great that they appear impossible to resolve, as Qatar and the Super League have shown.

This is a book on men’s professional football. It doesn’t cover women’s professional football nor the amateur game. That’s not due to a disregard or a lack of interest but rather an apt reflection of modern football itself: it marginalises both amateurs and women. Men’s football outside Europe is also only dealt with in passing as it’s sadly only a tangential phenomenon as well.

I’ve experienced the changes since 1992 and I still remember the back story too. That doesn’t necessarily make me a more qualified author of this book.

On the contrary, maybe the opposite is true as I'm still emotionally attached. I know that the good old days were in truth rather dark times, darker than many imagine. Modernisation was strictly necessary at the time. Even though I don't consider myself nostalgic, I also see the things that football has lost in the age of modernity. Most importantly, the game used to be far less important. A minor matter that people were passionate about, but no more than that.

This book's aim is to outline the many different and often confusing elements of the last thirty years' development, and to find out why and how we have reached this point. Often enough, pure coincidence and chaos played a surprisingly huge role, there was always a chance that things could have easily turned out differently. German football, in particular, is a good example of a league following a different path. In the end, football is the same as other walks of life. We're not just subjects of history, we can also be its agents. Football's future could yet look different, if only we want it to.

Berlin, June 2022

Part 1 Big Bang

1 New friends in high places

The history of football is, in many ways, a story about the media - and it started well before the advent of television. When football became a sport for the masses at the end of the 19th century, the game went into bed with the media straight away. Newspaper publishers pressurised First Division teams to kick off at the same time, to save them from having to update their editions with results on Saturdays and having to send out paper boys repeatedly during the day. England's traditional 3pm kick-off was in truth a concession to the most important medium at the time. Just as games are spread throughout the weekend at the request of television today, they were purposefully bunched together then. Newspapers helped football reach a bigger audience in its infancy, and football did the same for the publishers. Later on, radio arrived to carry the names of clubs and players well beyond their locale. But the medium that changed football most was television, a box that beamed moving, live pictures into people's living rooms. An unbeatable combination.

Television made football a global sport from the 1970s onwards, transforming the games' economic foundations in the process. The sale of TV rights became the biggest source of income, increased visibility grew the public's interest and brought in improved sponsorship deals in turn. This

dynamic started a virtuous cycle of growth that was only momentarily halted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

One year changed everything: 1992. But why didn't it happen ten or fifteen years earlier, when televisions had already ceased being a luxury good?

Well into the 1980s, most TV stations in Western Europe were public broadcasters; commercial channels were rare. In the East, television was state-run until the Iron Curtain came down. Western channels were financed by licensing fees or direct state-funding. Television was thus obliged to cover all facets of communal life, including sport in general and football specifically. But it didn't pay much money for it. German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF showed highlights of Bundesliga games, the odd live national cup or European club game as well as all matches of the German national team. Because the public broadcasters faced no competition for the rights, prices only moved up gradually. Between 1970 and 1987, the value of Bundesliga highlights rose from €3m to a still fairly modest €9.2m per season in today's currency. As income from gate receipts continued to be the more important revenue stream, clubs didn't even want too much football on TV screens. Live Bundesliga football was only shown in rare exceptions, and even highlight coverage was restricted to three and later to four games for many years. International club competition games were mostly added to TV schedules at short notice, once clubs were certain that the stadiums were filled.

Over the course of the 1980s, the TV landscape in Europe underwent massive change. In Germany, the first broadcasting licences for commercial channels were awarded in 1984, partly due to the belief of the conservative government of chancellor Helmut Kohl that public broadcasters were politically too far to the left. Kohl hoped that new channels such as SAT.1 or RTL plus that were financed by advertising, not licence fees, would provide political counterweight. In Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher's Tory government had similar expectations of the BBC's emerging competitors. The invention of cable and satellite television made it possible to distribute these new channels, including special interest broadcasters such as news station CNN (started in 1980) or MTV, which started transmitting a dedicated program for Europe in 1987. In France, Canal+, Europe's first-ever Pay-TV channel, went live in 1984. The broadcast was encrypted and needed a decoder to be seen. From the very first day, Canal+ showed football games from the French top division.

Suddenly, a new market for TV rights emerged. When RTL plus became the first commercial channel to buy the Bundesliga rights in 1988, the price immediately doubled to more than €20m. Football's ability to attract a new audience quickly made it a hugely appealing proposition for the new stations. Australian media tycoon Rupert Murdoch once described the game as "a battering ram" for the establishment of his BSkyB channel. Things got interesting.

The same was true of international club competitions, where chaos continued to reign. Stations still had to buy the live rights to each game individually, and on an ad-hoc basis. Clubs increasingly felt that UEFA, the union of European federations, were missing out on new opportunities. In their view, the knock-out format of European cup competitions was outdated — in 1987, it pinned the Italian champions SSC Napoli and superstar Diego Maradona against Real Madrid in the first round of the European Cup. The first leg in Madrid was watched by Silvio Berlusconi, the owner of AC Milan. Berlusconi was aghast. The game itself was a sad affair, played in an empty stadium due to previous crowd trouble. But the media entrepreneur also felt it was a waste for either the Spanish or Italian champions to get knocked out in the first round of the most-coveted club competition. Big clubs cannibalising each other so early in the competition destroyed economic value, he felt, while UEFA seemed oblivious. Berlusconi hired advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi to develop a concept for a new European competition. The London-based company came up with an eighteen-club format, with an access list based on “merit, tradition and television”, “a league for the big TV markets,” as Alex Flynn, who drafted the concept for the agency, remembers. Saatchi & Saatchi called their new competition “Super League”. UEFA turned down the proposal but the pressure on the federation to overhaul the European Cup increased.

Because in the meantime, the UEFA-Cup, the secondary competition in sporting terms, had become economically more interesting, due to there being more rounds of matches and therefore more games to sell. With up to four clubs from the same country as participants, broadcasters were happier to put their money there than into the more prestigious competition: Spanish channels immediately lost interest in the European Cup when the Spanish champions were knocked out and the same was true of England, Germany and Italy. To meet the demand for more guaranteed matches, UEFA brought in a group stage with eight teams after one round of knock-outs in the league champions' competition. That was only a half-way house, however. Two Germans, Klaus Hempel and Jürgen Lenz, drew up a more radical solution. They transformed the European Cup into the rocket-fuelled Champions League.

The two of them were first generation experts in the newly-invented subject of sports marketing, which informed their novel approach. Hempel had worked as an economist for Unilever in Hamburg and then moved to Adidas' France office in 1977. There, he met Horst Dassler, the son of company founder Adi Dassler, and both of them set-up the first global sports marketing agency: International Sport and Leisure (ISL).

Lenz, who grew up in Bremen close to the North Sea, was a sailor for a year before working at an ad agency in New York. Later, he moved to Hong Kong and Japan for six years. Having met Hempel at Adidas, he too became a

founding member of ISL. In 1991, Hempel and Lenz left to go it alone with their own agency, Television Event And Media Marketing (T. E. A. M.).

In search of clients, they met UEFA president Lennart Johansson in Zurich in spring of 1991. Over dinner at the stately Hotel Dolder Grand, the Swede told them that he wanted to reform the European Cup to dissuade top clubs from setting up their own league. The best proposal would win UEFA's business.

Hempel and Lenz checked into a spa hotel in Ticino, Switzerland, overlooking Lake Lugano for three weeks, doing fitness classes in the morning and sitting down for brainstorming sessions every day between two and five.

Their main focus was on turning the competition into a brand that would appeal to a new audience. Football had largely been perceived as a working class game until then, a game for "little people", and as predominantly male. Targeting different sections of society and women made the competition more attractive sponsors. Hempel and Lenz consciously created a luxurious feel, epitomised by a new anthem. English musician Tony Britten took inspiration from Baroque composer George Frederic Handel, creating a theme dominated by trumpets, and an operatic choir singing in the three official UEFA languages: "Ils sont les meilleurs. Sie sind die Besten. These are the champions".

The anthem was to be played when both teams lined up on the pitch, a festive ceremony intentionally reminiscent of international games. A star-spangled banner would be presented in the centre circle, a bit like a national flag. Broadcasters transmitting the games had to sign up to a uniform look. Designers from London produced graphics in silver and grey that were a marked departure from the brightly coloured, trashy look dominating screens at the time. Even the TV hosts' ties had to adhere to a tight dress code. Everything was supposed to look expensive, including the name: Champions League.

Just as important as the branding was the marketing concept. The basic idea was to sell the entire competition, not single matches. If broadcasters bought the rights, they were obliged to show one live game for each round as well as extended highlights, irrespective of the teams involved. Surprisingly, viewers kept watching even after their country's team had been eliminated. Aside from dictating schedules as well as look and feel of the competition to broadcasters, the new competition also came with its own sponsors. Clubs had to deliver a so-called clean stadium to T.E.A.M., freed of all advertising and banners that didn't belong to official partners of the Champions League. Even the names of coffee machines or television sets in VIP lounges had to be covered up if the manufacturers weren't among the sponsors. Some of these regulations felt absurd because nobody had thought about them before.

Hempel's and Lenz's proposal won the day over six rival concepts but UEFA demanded a financial guarantee of CHF150m for the first two seasons from T. E. A. M. During their search for a backer, they met one of the wealthiest businessmen in Germany, Arend Oetker.

He didn't know anything about football but set up a meeting with his former father in law, Otto Wolff von Amerongen, the president of Germany's Chamber of Commerce and Industry. All of a sudden, football had arrived in the upper echelons of society.

The new concept was a success from the start. Broadcasters fought over the rights. Sponsorship deals, too, increased by multiples. In total, income from the new Champions League was nine times higher than from the previous season in the European Cup. But that proved only the beginning.

2 Normal people

When Nick Hornby's "Fever Pitch" was published in 1992, the opening sentence alone struck a new tone. "I fell in love with football as I was later to fall in love with women: suddenly, inexplicably, uncritically, giving no thought to the pain or disruption it would bring with it," Hornby wrote about his eleven-year-old self experiencing his first game one September afternoon in 1968. Arsenal won 1-0 against Stoke City in an half-empty ground that day, thanks to a goal in the last minute.

On the next 250 pages, Hornby cast the football fan as a romantic figure. He couldn't quite remember what had happened on the pitch during his first game in attendance beyond the goal, but more than twenty years later, he could still recall "the overwhelming maleness of it all", men clouded in cigarette smoke, screaming out obscenities at the top of their lungs. Even more fascinating to him, however, was the prevailing sense of misery on the terraces: "What impressed me most was just how much most of the men around me hated, really hated, being there."

Hornby described fans' love for the game as a tragic affair, doomed to suffer disappointment. Supporters hated themselves for wasting their time on lousy players in run-down grounds. But they always came back, for the communal experience with their peers, and the rare moments of delirious happiness that couldn't be found anywhere else. But it wasn't fun. "Entertainment as pain

was an idea entirely new to me,” Hornby wrote. The type of supporter he described was, in other words: crazy.

The madness of crowds is a constant of the game. The word “fan” is short for fanatic, the Italian “tifosi” stems from “tifo”, typhus. Being a football fan is a kind of illness. The mere thought of supporting a team is far from rational. Why should it matter if the team in red win rather than those wearing blue?

In football’s early years, support followed the logic of tribalism, the connection to the local team was formed by proximity. The ground was in the neighbourhood. Often enough, spectators knew the players personally because they lived nearby or worked at the same places as they did. A football team were representatives of a particular part of town or the town itself, and matches against other parts of town or towns created strong “us against them” sensations of local pride. Emotions could boil over at times. As early as the late 19th century, newspapers carried reports about riots and attacks on referees who had been perceived as biased.

In the early 1960s, change was afoot. Youth became a phase of life in its own right. Sub cultures arose, along with past-times that adults frowned upon. A central tenet was music, made for an audience that hadn’t existed before — teenagers.

In 1964, the BBC dispatched a reporter to Anfield Road. Standing in front of The Kop, the main standing terrace of Liverpool’s stadium, he says: “An

anthropologist studying this Kop crowd would be introduced into as rich and mystifying a popular culture as on any South Sea island. Their rhythmic swaying is an elaborate and organised ritual. They seem to know intuitively when to begin. Throughout the match they invent new words, usually within the framework of old Liverpool songs, to express adulatory, cruel or bawdy comments.” The camera points at 24,000 beatifically smiling mad men, who push up and down and stairs, sway from side to side and sing “She loves you” by The Beatles.

Many of the faces are young. And there’s not a single woman. These young men look like little adults, a lot of them even wear ties. But that’s about to change, as youth culture developed its own sartorial styles: Mods, rockers, punks, skinheads or kids wearing tartan like the Bay City Rollers. They come together in their own tribes on the cheap standing sections behind the goals, recognisable as fans thanks to their scarves or the badges on their denim vests. If they run into you young men wearing another club’s colours, there’s a danger it will all go off.

As football violence became a habitual past-time that no longer needed wrong refereeing decisions as a starting point, the phenomenon was subject to endless exploration by anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologist and social psychologists form the 1970s onwards. The crowd’s delinquency was often seen as a sign of a growing estrangement within the game, since players and spectators had come to inhabit different worlds, those of admirers and the

admired. Fans who explicitly sought out violence became a part of new youth culture called hooliganism which dominated grounds in the 1980s. They called it *the English disease*: Young men beating each other up outside grounds or on the terraces. When “Fever Pitch” was published, English football had been through two decades of football fandom being almost exclusively known for the violence of hooligans.

The rise of hooliganism was partly fuelled by a media feedback loop. In the mid 70s, the “Daily Mirror” published a “League of Violence”, listing the clubs with most arrested supporters. The BBC produced a famous documentary about a Millwall hooligan firm called “F troop” in 1977. Soon later similar groups popped up all over the country, Chelsea’s “Headhunters”, the “Inter City Firm” of West Ham United or Birmingham City’s “Zulu Warriors”. Things began to escalate, until they got out of control in 1985.

That year marked a tragic low point in the history of English football. On March 13 1985, Millwall supporters invaded the pitch during a cup game with Luton and fought the police, while millions of people watched on, live on television. On May 11 1985, rubbish underneath an old wooden stand in Bradford caught fire. 57 people died, many more got injured. The tragedy had nothing to do with hooliganism but it exemplified how run down many grounds had become. They were death traps. That very same day, a young supporter lost his life in Birmingham after a wall collapsed on him during a riot.

The “Sunday Times” denounced football as “a slum game played by slum people in slum stadiums”. On May 29 1985, that description felt sadly apt. The whole of continent was tuned in live as Liverpool supporters attacked Juventus fans before the European Cup final in Brussels’ Heysel stadium. 39 people were killed when a wall collapsed during the mass panic. English clubs were banned from European competition for five years.

Because football fans were predominantly seen as violent trouble-makers, the greatest catastrophe in the history of English football occurred on April 15 1989. 97 people died in a crush during the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Hillsborough. Fans were funnelled into two overcrowded pens but police and stewards were oblivious to the plight of those pressed against the fences. Conditioned to seeing supporters not as human beings but a safety risk, they were more worried about avoiding a pitch invasion and reacted far too late.

Hornby didn’t gloss over the many tragedies and violent incidents but “Fever Pitch” opened up a different perspective on fandom. His version of a supporter was a lovable madmen or nutty romantic, far more devoted to his football club than to love interests or friendships. His was a strange obsession bordering on an unhealthy addiction. Hornby’s deft touch and many references to pop culture and literature still ensured that a sympathetic reader understood his type of fan to be a fundamentally decent person, his many obsessions notwithstanding.

The book had a liberating effect, too. Coy middle-class fans who'd always felt a little guilty about their love for the not-so beautiful game were suddenly happy to come out: Hornby's book recast football as a perfectly respectable kind of popular culture one no longer had to be ashamed of.

His book was a huge success in England, selling more 275,000 copies in the first three years alone. "Fever Pitch" was at the vanguard of a new phenomenon: football fans celebrating their own fandom. At almost every club, supporters produced their own fanzines, around two hundred titles were in circulation when "Fever Pitch" was released. Copy shops and fast-printing plants made it cheap and easy for fans to publish their irreverent, often self-deprecating thoughts on the game.

A lead column after the Hillsborough disaster in "When Saturday Comes", a national fanzine that would become a professional title later, spelled out the most important message these supporter-made publications wanted to get out: the vast majority of football fans were decent people. "Fans [are] deemed to be passive accomplices to the sociopathic minority," WSC wrote. "The police see us as as a mass entity, fuelled by drink and a single-minded resolve to wreak havoc. The implication is that 'normal people' need to be protected from the football fan. But we *are* normal people."

The Football Supporters Association, founded in 1989 in the wake of Hillsborough, adopted the slogan "Reclaim the game" in an attempt to re-define cultural attitudes. Normal people had become an afterthought as vast

section of the traditional media and authorities' displayed open hostility towards football fans.

Part of the success of "Fever Pitch" was giving a voice to the "normal people" who had been quiet for a long time. The book also marked a cultural inflection point: it described a way of watching football that was already on its way out but more importantly, it offered the possibility of engaging with the game's madness in a cultured manner. England wasn't the only country in need of this civilising effect. Everywhere in Western Europe — and in the East, too, after the fall of the Iron Curtain — crowd violence had become a mainstay on the terraces. The moral panic that greeted these awful excesses overlooked the fact that only a small minority were interested in beating each other up. Trouble-makers took up all the public's attention while normal people were overlooked.

Hempel and Lenz had opened the doors for new audience by creating the Champions League but the same was true of Hornby's book: It was no longer a contradiction to be a civilised human being and football fan at the same time. Supporters weren't an amorphous mass that could be caged into rusty pens and left to die there any longer. They were a big part of the game and sought about claiming their due.

3 Dead money comes alive

Football was invented in England, the starting point of the game's conquest of the world. The first football association was founded in England, the games' first champion was proclaimed there, too. England gave birth to the game's intrinsic connection with the media and the first big stadiums. England was always football's most important country, but not always in a sporting sense. It led football down a deadly cul-de-sac during the age of hooliganism and also found a way out of it again. The Premier League was established and evolved into the world's leading domestic competition. For better or for worse, England has been football's flywheel.

In 1885, the FA allowed footballers to be paid, a measure that took the game beyond its upper class origins. Football had been invented in elite boarding schools, where sport was a big part of the pupils' moral education. (As David Winner illustrates in his book "Those Feet", playing the game was supposed to protect boys from the terrible dangers of masturbation in the Victorian era.)

Football-playing workers were now free to make a living from the game. Their participation also played a decisive role in the popularisation of the game: the crowd enjoyed watching sportsmen of the same background as theirs.

Three years later, the FA agreed that the newly-founded Football League could organise professional football, and in the following year, the first ever

league champions in the history of the game were crowned: Preston North End Football Club, a club from a northern industrial town famous for its textile industry.

By 1899, the league's twelve clubs had grown to thirty-six, and there was a Second Division below the First. That same year, the FA's statutes stipulated that clubs should be set up as limited liability companies to reduce the financial risk at a time when many clubs were building expensive stadiums. The measure protected the mostly local business men in charge from losing their personal fortunes if the clubs went bust.

Rule 34 of the new statutory regulations also sharply curtailed clubs' strive for profit. Dividends for shareholders were limited to five per cent of profits, and club directors were prohibited from being paid. Few clubs were owned by a single person, most had a group of local businessmen as shareholders. Some of them also issued free float shares to raise additional capital, if a new ground was being built, for example. They were mostly bought up by supporters. Making a financial profit was never at the forefront of anyone's mind.

Rule 34 effectively stopped owners from running their clubs as business ventures. Owning a club was more akin to a public service, and owners regarded their sides as cultural institutions in line with Victorian ideals. They considered themselves "custodians" of a cherished community asset.

That isn't to say that their motives were always entirely altruistic. Football club owners enjoyed the attention and importance that soon increased as the game's popularity grew. Football became a sport of big cities. Almost every town with a population of more than 100,000 in 1911 had its own professional club. "These city dwellers craved a cultural expression of their urbanism going beyond familial and local ties," historian Richard Holt wrote. Football clubs fulfilled that role, raising attention to those in leadership positions.

At times, there were also more tangible interests at play. Liverpool FC were founded by a brewer who owned a stadium at Anfield Road and wanted to sell his beer to spectators. He had lost Everton FC as tenants having asked for too much rent and thus launched a new club in their place. In 1902, a brewery in Manchester saved Newton Heath FC from bankruptcy and transformed them into a side that aimed to represent the whole town: Manchester United. And in London, a successful businessman first bought the stadium at Stamford Bridge and then founded Chelsea Football Club to get people into the ground.

Some owners' economic interests in connection with their football teams notwithstanding, clubs were ultimately non-profit organisations. That was a key part of football's enormous success. Tickets remained affordable, too. From the mid-1920s to the 70s, prices merely doubled. Everyone was able to

attend the games. Until 1976, there was even a fixed minimum price, in order that tickets weren't sold too cheaply.

To keep the four professional leagues competitive, gate receipts were shared. Visiting teams received 20 per cent of ticket sales, a measure that helped smaller teams from smaller towns in particular. A further four per cent were added to a pot that was evenly distributed among the 93 professional sides. The same happened when TV rights were first sold in the 1960s. Legally, English football clubs were set up as companies, but in spirit, they weren't, until well into the 1980s.

Peter Hill-Wood, then the majority-owner of Arsenal FC, famously dismissed shares in a football club as "dead money" when he sold 16.6 per cent of the club to businessman David Dein for £292,000 in 1983. But Dein was among a small group of entrepreneurs who had sensed during football's biggest crisis that a new era with new possibilities was dawning. Two years earlier, rule 34 had been amended to allow club directors to get paid. One of the first owners to take advantage was Martin Edward, who had inherited the majority share in Manchester United from his father.

Property developer Irving Scholar oversaw even bigger change at Tottenham Hotspur, by taking the club public in 1984. More precisely, he set-up a holding company and floated its shares on the stock market. The money raised went towards the renovation of the West Stand at White Hart Lane. Spurs going public was in clear violation of rule 34 but the Football

Association for some unknown reason ignored it. A letter to the footballing authorities in which Scholar had explained his intentions was never answered.

Scholar and Spurs ushered in systemic change. After more than eight decades of football clubs as non-profit organisations, they had been transformed into tradable business assets that paid out dividends and appreciated in value. In hindsight, it's astonishing how little attention was paid to this revolution at the time, but English football's institutions were probably occupied with the existential crisis facing the game. Attendance figures had continuously decreased since the golden 1950s but in the 80s, they all but collapsed. In light of notorious hooligan violence, it took quite some imagination to think of football clubs as healthy businesses.

And yet some could foresee a different future. Dein, Scholar, Edwards, Philipp Carter (Everton) and Noel White (Liverpool) came together in an informal "Big Five" of the biggest clubs at the time. They took inspiration from sports in the United States, where professional leagues were good business and clubs made decent money from selling branded apparel. Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur both set up merchandising departments. Clubs soon brought in revenue from advertising boards, shirt sponsorship and kit suppliers. But most importantly, the look across the Atlantic taught them about the value of TV rights.

There had been harbingers of the new TV age in England, too. As early as 1985, commercial channel ITV had offered the Big Five a tempting deal: Since their teams made for the best ratings, ITV wanted to show more of their games and pay them extra money. The Football League's other clubs were outraged, but the genie was now out of the bottle. Why should the bigger clubs share income with the smaller ones if far fewer people were interested in them? A less egalitarian distribution of the TV money would now also personally benefit Dein, Edwards and the others. Club custodians had turned into custodians of their personal wealth.

It would take another seven years until the bigger clubs were ready to go it alone, but then the departure was radical. In 1992, the twenty-two First Division sides of the Football League said goodbye to the body they had been a part of since 1888 and set up their own league, with its own TV deal. The Football League were naturally horrified about losing the most popular clubs and the biggest chunk of their income. But the Football Association, who had long been at loggerheads with the League, stabbed them in the back and gave their blessing to the new competition, called the Premier League. Apparently, the FA reasoned that a concentration of quality in a new top league would strengthen the English national team. But national team manager Graham Taylor thought the idea laughable: "People think that a lot of thought has gone into that Premier League. But there hasn't, and I'm not convinced it will

improve the English national team either. I think a lot of it is simply based on greed,” he said in a newspaper interview.

The Premier League’s foundation on February 20 1992 saw the clubs taking the very “nuclear option” Martin Edwards had spoken of in relation to setting up their own league. In one clean sweep, they brutally destroyed football’s existing order. Old egalitarian principles were consigned to the dustbin of history. Now, it was everyone for themselves and their own profits. The Premier League secessionists also got very lucky, as new developments in the TV market brought in much more money for the rights than initially expected.

ITV, who had showed live games in the previous years, were in a bidding war with BSkyB. Rupert Murdoch’s satellite channel, set up three years earlier, was close to going bust, losing one million pounds every week. They needed 500,000 more subscribers. Murdoch was desperate to show football as a means to saving his failing station. On the morning the clubs decided on whose proposal they would accept, he raised his offer by another 30 million pounds. In total, BSkyB were now bidding 304 million pounds for five years. Football rights had never been worth this much, and what’s more, these riches no longer had to be divided up between ninety-two clubs but only between twenty-two.

But first, two thirds of the Premier League clubs had to agree to the BSkyB deal. ITV were offering less money, but the games would still be available

for free to anyone with a television, whereas on BSkyB, they'd be hidden on Pay-TV. The decisive fourteenth yes vote (among two abstentions) came from Alan Sugar, who had since bought Irving Scholar's Spurs shares. Sugar owned Armstrad, a company that made most of BSkyB's set top boxes and dishes. Unsurprisingly, he voted in line with his wider business interests.

On August 16 1992, BSkyB broadcast the first game of the nascent Premier League. 500,000 viewers who had invested in the new equipment and paid 5.99 pounds a month to Murdoch tuned in to see Nottingham Forest play Liverpool. A similar game would have attracted seven million viewers on ITV. But they wouldn't have paid anything for it.

As a response to English football's existential crisis, the foundation of the Premier League was typical of its time. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had started privatising state utilities such as British Telecom, British Rail and British Gas and sold off council housing. She crushed the power of unions in the wake of the 1984/1985 miners' strike, an industrial dispute that taken on the character of a civil war.

Thatcher rebuilt the country, designating the financial markets the answer to all economic ills. Industry, football's traditional breeding ground, was consigned to a part time role.

On October 27 1986, a new law allowed traditional clearing banks into investment banking and stockbroking, which enabled financial institutes to

speculate with their clients' deposits. The financial markets were opened up to foreign banks and the American banks brought their cutthroat culture to London's City: risky deals, huge profits, massive bonuses. In "Cityboy", an expose of life in the Square Mile, former banker Geraint Anderson wrote: "Who is Cityboy? He's every brash, suited, FT-carrying idiot who ever pushed past you on the tube. He's the egotistical buffoon who loudly brags about how much cash he's made on the market at dinner parties. He's the greedy, ruthless wanker whose actions are helping turn this world into the shit-hole it's rapidly becoming."

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama published the global bestseller "The End of History". Three years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, the American political scientist declared the ultimate victory of liberal democracy and the market economy.

Historian Timothy Snyder called it "the politics of inevitability": "The sense that the future is just more of the present, that the laws of progress are known, that there are no alternatives, and therefore nothing really to be done." That prevailing mood explained why football's huge changes were hardly debated. Capitalism had won inside the grounds, too. There were no longer any alternatives.

The abolition of the separation between traditional banks and investment banks became known as the "big bang" in the history of British finance. Football's equivalent were the founding of the Premier League and the

Champions League. Both turbo-charged the game's commercialisation, or more precisely, it's commodification. Football became a hot property like never before. Clubs could be bought and sold, games became primarily a TV product, and soon everybody was drowning in money. Football was fundamentally changed for ever — in England and beyond.

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