

Football: The hate that dares not speak its name! - Perry Groves



An article about homophobia in football from Black Flag #218 1999.

Football is the national sport in Britain, as in most the world, and New Labour have embraced the cheap popularity the spin doctors reckon it brings with relish. Most media criticism of the dominant role of football in popular culture comes from people who hate it, such as supposed feminists denouncing it as sexist in terms which reveal their class hatred. Its acceptance by the establishment has been aided by an image makeover of the game as middle class, or at least as a Loaded-style middle class parody of working class culture.

The reaction to this has taken a number of forms, notably hooliganism's image with the fans beginning to change from that of mindless violence against one's own to that of defending our turf against the middle class invasion. Working class football culture had changed in reaction to the Heysel and Hillsborough stadium disasters and through the rise of the fanzine movement, making it easier to be an intelligent football fan, rather than just an anorak or a hooligan. Rupert Murdoch's use of football as a battering ram to establish Sky TV, and the consequent increased commercialisation of the sport have damaged this.

The fact that all the changes in football have been imposed from above - all-seater stadia, satellite TV, pay-per-view, Bosman, etc. - and exploited by the clubs, many of whom are now accountable to shareholders as plc's, TV companies, or players and their agents, leaves fans marginalised and resentful of change. In the absence of a strong progressive movement among the fans, the frustration and resentment taken out on opposition or under-performing players and officials as routine is becoming a vehicle for a nasty undercurrent.

To be a fan of a Premier League club these days requires an unprecedented degree of planning and financial commitment. For all that money and effort, the product has got to deliver, so light-hearted criticism and having a laugh are endangered by a new fanaticism. Fanzine culture has been assimilated by the media - Sky are really good at this - and commercialised. How do you assert the

working class character of football support when your other means of expression have been usurped? By unacceptable behaviour, of course.

Yes, we have no bananas!

Consider for a moment one of life's little ironies. Kevin Campbell, a refugee from the racial abuse of his Turkish club's president, scores nine goals to win Everton four games and save them from relegation. The irony is that until fairly recently Everton, as their fans boasted, were "white", as they had been reminding Liverpool fans since the latter's club signed John Barnes. The Reds' own racist contingent had marked Barnes' first game by throwing bananas onto the pitch.

The signings of Barnes by Liverpool in the late 1980's, then of Daniel Amokachi by Everton in the "buy a World Cup player, any player" frenzy of 1994, "cleared" the clubs, and their fans, of the racism charges. In the eyes of such myopic institutions as the Football Association and the media, that is. What really makes racism unacceptable is big black geezers suggesting that you have offended them in a menacing fashion. When racists feel safe, they still express their hatred. A guy sitting near me at Highbury once vented his frustration at perceived time-wasting by Amokachi as he was substituted by calling him a "Jigaboo", for example.

Racism still affects football, even in the image-conscious Premier League, but it is usually isolated. Not so homophobia, which is what this article is actually about. So why is the government so concerned about the former, but part of the conspiracy of near-silence about the latter? The short answer is they are nice, liberal homophobes who think we are merely pursuing a lifestyle. While Blair and co. think we should be tolerated, and oppose overt hatred, they don't really understand what the fuss is all about.

Jack Straw was expressing this view when he recently declared that same-sex couples would be second-best as parents to the nuclear family. Since "gays" are all in Old Compton Street bitching over cappuccino (lesbians don't rate a mention, as they are all at home with their monogamous, asexual lover and the cats), we can't be on the football pitch or in the stands, can we? This means that unlike black people we can be discounted, and the establishment's preferred response to racism - ignore it and it will go away, attack it and you'll only encourage them - can be applied to homophobia.

When Paul Ince, then a Manchester United player, returned to West Ham United, his first club, a few years ago, much was made of the racism in his hostile reception. Bananas were allegedly thrown, but what you could hear on the highlights, so loud even the BBC couldn't disguise it, was "Incey takes it up the arse!". No comment was made on this whatever, and the BBC likes to keep crowd noise low so that the vocal emissions of the lower classes do not reach the delicate ears of the armchair "fans".

Regular racial abuse still happens, and is still ignored by commentators. At the last European Cup Winners' Cup Final, covered by the BBC at Villa Park, Real de Mallorca's Lauren was routinely greeted with monkey noises by the Lazio fans, to deafening silence from the commentary team, including Trevor Brooking who as a national sports administrator might reasonably be expected to express political views.

The allegation of homosexuality directed at Ince was easily identifiable as the worst conceivable insult in the minds of those chanting. Similarly, when discussing the Robbie Fowler-Graeme Le Saux incident, Sky pundit Frank McClintock thought being called a "poof" justified Le Saux's reaction. This is not unique to football, and doing something about homophobic abuse at grounds can not be isolated from the need to tackle the criminalisation of, discrimination and hate crimes against us in wider society.

But what about those of us for whom football is important who are also lesbian, gay or bisexual? I can't speak for players or managers as, significantly, there are none out, and I don't definitely know any. I can give you an idea of what it's like to be a queer fan. Yes, I take it up the arse and I object, as any self-respecting Gooner would, to being likened to Graeme Le Saux. You might say it's questionable whether I really have any self-respect, however, as I have three times sat silently in the midst of thousands of my peers as they have gleefully sung "Le Saux takes it up the arse!" (to the tune of "Go West!", some people have no sense of irony).

The media and the football authorities have reluctantly been forced to acknowledge homophobia by Le Saux's whack to the back of Robbie Fowler's head after the latter had stuck out his backside and (allegedly) taunted our sensitive-but-straight hero with the words "Come on, Graeme, give it to me up the arse!". Le Saux, incidentally, got only a one-match ban for the assault, in spite of the fact that "violent conduct" gets you a three-match ban, and Fowler got two matches for "bringing the game into disrepute". I can't help feeling that three matches apiece would have been best, and that Le Saux was treated leniently because he is straight, and no red-blooded man could let such an insult go unpunished.

The incident did at least, partially and temporarily, break the silence. The only previous media coverage of this salient feature of Arsenal-Chelsea games had been by gay football journalist Chas Newkey-Burden in Time Out, and that had been run in the gay, not the sport, section of the London listings magazine. Why people interested in the gay scene need to know homophobia is offensive, and sports fans don't, is a question that begs asking. Ironically, it was Le Saux's defence of his heterosexuality, through stereotypical violence, which brought the issue before a wider audience.

Le Saux's assault on Fowler meant there had to be media coverage. Professional Footballers' Association Chief Executive Gordon Taylor even said the unsayable, that there are gay footballers, but managed to make it sound like a hypothetical concept, rather than a reality. Unlike racism, homophobia is not just unacceptable, it is almost unspeakable. This is itself a problem, because it demonstrates that to acknowledge, or highlight, the existence of homophobia, is to admit to the existence of homosexuality in football. The reluctance to do this speaks volumes.

Real men take it up the arse!

I read a full page article on Le Saux in The Independent shortly before the Fowler incident where there was a coy reference to abusive chants "some of which question his masculinity". I actually missed a game because of those chants. True, it would also have cost me £21 to see Arsenal Reserves get thumped 5-0 at home by Chelsea in a competition so worthless Spurs won it, but the crunch was the homophobic crap.

Given recent events, it is unsurprising that gobshite Sports Minister Tony Banks, with his affiliation to Chelsea, should have weighed in. According to the Pink Paper, having been contacted by a group of gay professional footballers, he urged them to come out and start a discussion on the subject. Since the manifestations of homophobia at football can not be separated from those in wider society, about which the "gay friendly" government is determined to do as little as possible, it is a bit rich putting the onus on gay footballers to kick it off in isolation.

Especially at the highest level, professional footballers' earnings (which are crap - as little as £8,000 a year - in the lower divisions of the League) are often made up of significant amounts of sponsorship. Now, call me a pessimist, but who is going to buy boots endorsed by a poof for their little boy? And how much stick would they get from their peers if they wore them? Unless there is significant progress towards making homosexuality (and bisexuality) acceptable, advertisers know the answer to those

questions. Sponsors find gay events which "stay within the community" like Prides attractive, but gay events which reach a wider audience don't get as much support.

Queer as folk's sponsor Beck's Beer pulled out after two episodes, and there have been gay- or lesbian- themed ad ideas pulled by the likes of Guinness and Virgin Vodka. The same would probably apply to out-gay professional footballers' chances of sponsorship. "Don't frighten the heterosexuals" remains the bottom line. Ironically, there was an ad for Amstel Beer during the African Nations Cup in South Africa a couple of years ago on Eurosport which featured a couple of drag queens and a leather-clad arse over a techno soundtrack with the slogan "... and enjoyed in the Amsterdam tradition"!

The gay footballer's dilemma also includes a big fear factor. Justin Fashanu may have had a lot of other stuff on his plate too, but "gay footballer's suicide" is a big deterrent. So are the fans. As it was put in the Comic Strip's "The Crying Game", Martina Navratilova never had to go to Elland Road. Until we can overcome these barriers, we can't cause the trouble which would be necessary to make the authorities and the media tackle homophobia.

The breakthrough might come if someone was forced out of the closet. Players are now precious commodities with the whip hand in contract negotiations. They aren't going to take too much abuse, and the clubs aren't going to relish losing their assets because of hate-filled morons. This issue might arise, because the Sun and the News of the World have recently run an "ethical" (no-names) outing campaign on two footballers.

I haven't read these papers, but from the Gay Times coverage I can make an educated guess that one was pictured "once too often" in the company of his native country's answer to Julian Clary before moving to England, and that the other is someone for whom he displays obvious affection. If I'm right these are two world class players at one of the country's most powerful and sophisticated clubs. If they were outed it might provide the kick up the arse that's needed to tackle homophobia in football.

It's difficult to say definitely why the level of homophobia has blown up now - the Le Saux storm began at Highbury in January 1998. Certainly the perceived gay-friendliness of the government, aggravated by its failure to actually take any effective measures, might be a factor. The tabloid hate campaigns, focused around the "heroic" battle of Baroness Young and the Bishops against the "all-powerful gay lobby", established the lie that "gay sex" and "gay lessons" were going to be imposed on "our kids". This could be part of the backlash, like the Soho bomb. The two bombs which preceded Soho were certainly part of a wider backlash to the gains made by the black community as the result of the Macpherson Enquiry into Stephen Lawrence's murder.

Here are some examples of the kind of casual homophobia we've taken for granted over the years: * One of two geezers who stumbled past me outside Islington Town Hall in May 1994 singing "One Nil to the Arsenal!" saying to the other "I can't believe we're singing a song by a couple of poofs!" (the aforementioned "Go West!" by the Pet Shop Boys, originally by the Village People; they never said this about "We are the Champions!" by "bisexual" Freddie Mercury!); * the North Bank chanting "Walker takes it up the arse!" at the Spurs goalkeeper for most of the second half of a home derby game; * the Highbury Italians sitting behind me at a screening of Newcastle United vs. Arsenal calling Graham Barber a poof for sending off Tony Adams, and me thinking "not with that haircut!".

Up the Arse!

Mind you, the previous year the guy sitting next to me had literally screamed "Eric's a wanker!" for the entire second 45 minutes of the derby at Walker's predecessor, and the year after some plonkers sang "Chim chimeney, chim chimeney, chim chimgeroo, Jurgen was a Nazi and now he's a Jew!" -

xenophobic, anti-Semitic, inaccurate and, worst of all, crap! That day there had been a Police Message about racist chanting before the game, which brought a predictable chorus of "Yiddo! Yiddo!" in defiance.

All this pales into insignificance beside what a bloke two rows in front of me screamed one year when Spurs equalized from a throw when we'd put the ball out to allow Patrick Vieira to be treated after a deliberate foul by Chris Armstrong the ref. didn't give. "I can see why Hitler gassed you lot, you dirty cheating Yid scum!". Fortunately, I've never heard more than a couple of people singing "Spurs are on their way to Belsen!", and never at a game.

Football is overpriced, so Richards whose idea of machismo is laddism, tourists, etc. are often in evidence at the glamour clubs. When it matters, however, more of the real fans can find the money, and some people you'd definitely cross the street to avoid. Generally, anti-Semitism at Arsenal is exaggerated, we probably have more Jewish fans than Spurs, they just don't think it's a big deal. Nor have I ever heard anyone remark on the fact that our biggest shareholder is a diamond merchant(!) called Danny Fiszman.

I once heard some middle class tosser moaning about Arsenal fans' anti-Semitism to his mate once, and thought "the guy who's just equalized for Southampton is Eyal Berkovic, yer actual Israeli International - do you hear any 'Yiddo!' chants? No!". Racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and homophobia in football are usually ways of getting at opposition players and fans. Football-related motives do not excuse such hatred, however.

All of which serves to put Arsenal fans' leading role in homophobic abuse of Le Saux into some kind of context. What started as a typical reaction to a particularly fractious and annoying player - I remember an unpunished elbow on Lee Dixon - for first Blackburn Rovers, then back at Chelsea, has turned into something far worse. (David Beckham annoys us for similar reasons, and was still having running battles with Fredrik Ljungberg during the England-Sweden game. We don't envy him "Posh" - her parents live in Chingford, which we know is where publicans go to die.)

There is no gay equivalent of the big intimidating black guy who's part of the Firm taking exception to racist remarks. Without fear, challenging prejudice and hatred becomes a lecture, becomes a "middle class" restriction on your "freedom". I've toyed with the idea of saying many things - "you're just jealous 'cos the missus wouldn't wear the strap-on last night!"; "I take it up the arse, and I object to being likened to Graeme Le Saux!"; etc. There is a remote possibility of being killed by someone who's come to football to take out all their frustrations on anyone different, but mostly it just wouldn't work.

All Fools' Day

Confronting someone when you need to assert yourself for your self-esteem is something else. It might even make people stop, but it won't change their minds. Football still has an element of All Fools' Day to it. This means being able to do what is forbidden by authority, including hurling racial abuse and other expressions of hatred. Explaining the unacceptability of racism or homophobia to your peers in a rational environment might work. To tell people they can't or shouldn't do something in an atmosphere like a football match is to assume the mantle of the very authority they are trying to escape.

The authorities and the media could make a big difference if they built on the good work they have done with anti-racist initiatives outside the stadia. However, the government has demonstrated in relation to hate crimes that it considers equating homophobia with racism as devaluing the latter, "diluting the anti-racist message" is how they put it. Presumably they also deplore the fact that the

nailbombers' evidently greater hatred of queers than of black and Asian people "diluted [their] racist message".

Part of the reason for this differential treatment is that black and ethnic minority people have had to argue, lobby and riot for more than 20 years to get from lipservice to the Macpherson Enquiry. Homophobia does not equate easily with racism, it is more like anti-Semitism, but the crucial difference in government attitudes is down to insufficient pressure to force them to act. We are too socially and politically diverse, and too many of us are invisible, to be able to assert that kind of sustained pressure.

The biggest problem is the heavily-gendered culture of sport. Homophobia is used to police masculinity and femininity. A sensitive man or an athletic woman lets the side down, and is therefore accused of being queer. Someone who "betrays" their sex by acknowledging their desires or relationships is considered to be of the other sex, which amounts to "cheating" in women's sports, and invites ridicule in men's. Even the Gay Games is dogged by repeated controversies over Transsexual athletes.

Amelie Mauresmo was likened to a man by both Martina Hingis and Lindsay Davenport recently because of her lesbianism, rather than her impressive shoulders. Many straight women tennis players are overweight for professional athletes, finding that the lean, hungry look brings their "femininity/heterosexuality" into question. Players like Anna Kournikova have also been hyped because of their appearance, rather than their ability, by a media which is obsessed with women players' underwear and the length of their skirts. Women footballers also tend to have long hair and an almost exaggeratedly "feminine" appearance, presumably to prevent accusations of lesbianism.

The flip side of the coin is that even (male) golfers are macho! (When did you last see someone play a golf shot as a six-foot-three hardman flew in showing two sets of metal studs?) A lesbian-I-work-with's partner has seen one of Britain's top athletes with his boyfriend, but he's in the closet, so what hope is there for lesser mortals? Football, as a contact sport, is among the most macho.

Argentina's last national manager, Daniel Passarella, famously wouldn't pick players with long hair. His prohibitions also extended to "homosexuals", which drew flak from one Diego Maradona, who argued that playing ability should be the sole criterion for selection, not sexual orientation or hairstyle. Argentinian gay rights organisations countered that there were already gay players in the national side, anyway. Maradona is currently suing the wife of fellow cocaine-ban recipient Claudio Caniggia, because she accused him of being in love with her husband, incidentally.

Football is the working class sport, and its culture reflects that of the working class in Britain, from which the players, coaches and fans still overwhelmingly come. This means that middle class and "gay" cultures are as alien to it as the greater sophistication of the equally proletarian overseas players. Difference is perceived as a threat, and xenophobia directed towards French players in particular is on the increase even as the integration of (British) black players helps racism decline. The same mindset which sees Graeme Le Saux as a "poof" because he reads the Guardian, sees Emmanuel Petit as a "shit, French bastard".

"But there'll never be a girl who can take my heart away..."

Same-sex desires do have expression within working class culture, however. Whether they meet men through clubs and bars (outing is frowned on in the gay community, so it's relatively safe), or by cruising, sex with other men is not incompatible with a "straight", i.e. "masculine", identity, although it obviously has to be kept secret. Many footballers experience personal problems, especially in their

early twenties when they are supposed to grow up a bit, and a lot of these have got to be around sexual identity, homophobia is after all the biggest single cause of teenage suicide and self-harm attempts.

Most footballers are encouraged by their clubs to get married and have children as young as possible, to provide them with stability and prevent "off-pitch" problems affecting their performance. Ostensibly, early marriage is supposed to keep players out of clubs and betting shops, and to give them a maturity they wouldn't get from the perpetual adolescence of British dressing-room culture. In folklore marriage would also "cure" bisexual footballers with regular sex, and help keep them on the "straight" and narrow.

Bisexual behaviour by married men is a phenomenon common to many cultures. Another widespread cultural expression of same-sex desire is pederasty. That is a mentor-pupil relationship with a sexual dimension, which is the form which most of the mythical Greek Homosexuality took. Now, I might be reading too much into this, but a common phenomenon in English football is the manager with favourite players, whom he has often known since their teenage years. These relationships usually include an element of close friendship, and involve a manager buying the same player for several clubs as he moves around.

It is always possible to read too much into some things, but we are always on the lookout for others of our kind "passing". Jew-spotting is an activity in which both anti-Semites and Jews indulge, and the same applies to queer-spotting. This is based on a desire for affirmation of our identities through confirming that we are not alone. Isolation in a heterosexual family as children, followed by not knowing any other queers "like us", alienation from the commercial scene etc., have a lasting impact on most of us. We tend to indulge in speculation, looking for signs of what we know is there, somewhere.

In English football there was one very strange recent transfer where a player moved from a club where he was happy, which he had supported as a boy, after an incident involving the then manager. An incident, moreover, about which he has been gagged. How many unspeakable things are there in football - straight sex, drugs, violence, and crime are all acknowledged? Another unexplained incident involved a charismatic, high profile manager, who was mugged in a lay by in circumstances which were never fully explained. The common assumption is that he picked up a rent boy, who robbed him.

The majority of people who acknowledge our same-sex desires are working class, and many of us have our own problems with (middle class) "gay" culture, and the commercial scene. Soho queens and football hooligans might both agree that sport is not for nancy boys, but if you're working class and queer football is part of your culture, and maybe of your social life too. Our dilemma is whether to pretend that our gay and working class lives are separate, or to try and integrate the two and develop a distinctive expression of our gay lives in a working class context.

"Who the fuck's Kinsey?"

Isolation and fear would dog any such attempts. For the last four years Arsenal have launched their new kit on the same day as Pride. To celebrate both a decent shirt and my sexuality, I ordered one with my Kinsey number on the back, combining a joke about gay culture with football shirt modification. This being Arsenal World of Profit, one member of staff was allocated to the hundreds of pre-ordered shirts, and two dozen to the queue-on-the-day. Football and the gay scene have more in common than either would like to admit.

Inevitably, one guy in the queue complained that he had "a wedding to go to". I thought about chipping in with "And I've got a Gay Pride parade to go to!", but what's the point unless there's a wider campaign going on? I saw several other blokes wearing the new shirt at Pride later, but I just tell the

curious at football it's a joke, if you don't understand it, it's not for you. And the Gay Football Supporters' Network is a social group, not a lobby group.

You could also read a gay subtext into some of the in jokes about my club and its players. Known both abusively and parodically as "The Arse", the kind of adolescent male fascination with gender boundaries football fans (and a lot of other macho subcultures) indulge in has produced some odd nicknames for Arsenal players. The goalkeeper is, of course, known as "Spunky", Ray Parlour's long blond curls got the obvious "Shirley (Temple)"; a noted hardman got the sinister "Uncle Bouldy" from Alan Smith's daughters! You might think Dutch people are liberal, progressive, etc., but Bergkamp was christened "Denise" in Holland because he was seen as soft! I have been known to refer to the team as "the girls".

Some of the peripheral interests of the football fan take on a different slant if you're gay, too. I remember being disappointed when Javier Zanetti transferred to Internazionale from Banfield in Argentina, because Inter's black-and-blue stripes didn't go well with his complexion! Me and a gay mate who supports Barcelona had some fun at an Arsenal vs. Liverpool game speculating about "ecru" - the alleged colour of Liverpool's away shirts - and what name "designers" might call the off-tangerine colour of their goalkeeper's shirt. Since we lost 2-1, I was relieved I remembered where we were and stopped myself kissing him goodnight outside the ground - maybe, but not after a home defeat! Far too dangerous.

Back on February 13th I missed most of the first London Bisexual Festival, including the Bi Pride march, due to the 4th Round of the FA Cup. It's difficult to think of your life as taking place in different worlds - if I hadn't been on my way to Bloomsbury after the game, I wouldn't have heard about the Replay, or had a discussion with Sheffield United fans about it, and found out that they used to show Ian Wright's goal against Wednesday in the 1993 Final at half-time at Bramall Lane to cheer the fans up!

The Replay itself was on the same night as the first episode of "Queer as hype", but being a real fan who supports my local team, I didn't have to rush through the gleeful crowds ("Would you like to start again!") with a cry of "let me through, I've got a controversial gay drama to watch!". Two more Tuesday nights combined footie with QAF. And a woman I see on the train who I thought looked likely turned up at an away game screening with two teenage boys and another woman who looked even more likely.

We are more visible when we are not "the only one in the room", and invisibility and isolation inhibit speaking out far more than fear does. What company also does is allow you to relate to each other, not just to the heterosexual world on its own terms. This makes your behaviour change, and means that tolerance is no longer an option for liberals. Because you are no longer a lone aberration, people have to accept or reject you. If they reject you and you won't go away, the struggle begins.

Most of that struggle has to take place in wider society, particularly in schools to combat homophobic bullying and heterosexist sex education. Repealing Section 28 would send out the right message, and help people gain the confidence to take up the issues. Anti-discrimination measures and hate crimes legislation with teeth are also long overdue. Then Banks can urge gay footballers, and football fans, to do our bit. The catch is that we can't wait until it's safe, none of this will happen without pressure on the streets, and in community organisations. Who knows, I might eventually tell someone what "Kinsey 3" means.

Perry Groves