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Rethinking Football



An Essay Collection

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Preface

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The Great Reduction

Football has a history of great expansion, but the coronavirus pandemic might now lead to a great reduction in the number of professional clubs.

Since its creation in September 1888, the only events that have stopped the English league from playing were two world wars.

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, the season began as usual. Whereas amateur sports like cricket suspended their competitions, professional football kept the business going. Club owners and players did not want to lose money. Political authorities encouraged the league to continue, to boost morale on the domestic front. Gradually, football matches became a site of war propaganda and a useful recruitment tool for the British Army. As the war intensified during the winter, however, continuing to play attracted growing public criticism. At the end of April 1915, the season finished as scheduled. Everton were crowned champions. Sheffield United won the FA Cup in the 'khaki final' in front of a crowd dominated by uniformed soldiers. Almost nine months after the war had begun, football finally closed its doors. Only small, regional amateur contests still ran during wartime.

The 'Great' War ended in November 1918, but the league did not return until nine months later. Even when a crisis is over, it takes time to restart 'business as usual'. Once started, however, professional football came back strongly. The inter-war years were a booming period. Leagues expanded, clubs professionalised and built new stadiums, players earned more money, tactics and training evolved, and attendances grew.

In September 1939, it all stopped again. When World War Two began, the British government immediately suspended all large crowd events. After just three fixtures, the league was abandoned indefinitely. Instead, an amateur-like Wartime League was created, split into ten regional groups as teams were banned from travelling

farther than fifty miles. Attendance was initially limited to 8,000 spectators.

The first competition to reappear after the war was the FA Cup. In April 1946, Derby County won the final at a packed Wembley stadium. 1946/47 saw the return of the First Division, won by Liverpool. The Second World War had interrupted the league for seven seasons, a much longer break than the three missed seasons due to World War One. After 1946, unlike before, clubs took a much longer time to recover. In terms of professional development, both on and off the pitch, football in the 1950s did not again reach the level of the booming 1930s.

The two world wars transformed Britain, above all fostering a sense of modern national unity. Before 1914, imperialism, with its economic interests and racial beliefs, held the elites of the United Kingdom together. The masses were connected far more loosely. Places like London and Yorkshire were distant, both physically and mentally. England and Scotland had set up their football structures separately in the 19th century, mainly because they were too far apart from each other. Before 1914, football was not yet a national sport.

Mass mobilisation and mass suffering during the world wars forged a national bond. Old class divisions never went away but had to compete with the new primacy of the nation. Newspapers, radio and much later television, established a national audience. Railways, coaches, and later car travel, shrank the distance and connected all parts of Britain. Football hopped onto the train of nationalisation with enthusiasm.

One way in which the game grew rapidly was the number of professional clubs. In 1888, the newly founded Football League began with twelve teams from the Midlands and Northwestern England. By 1958, the league pyramid had reached its current maximum size of 92 members across four divisions. These seventy years between 1888 and 1958 witnessed the Great Expansion of the 'beautiful game', despite the devastating agony of two world wars. Football survived two great stops to its play because it had attached

itself to a powerful social force: nation-building.

Even taking away some exaggerated nostalgia, the 1960s were probably genuinely the Golden Age of English football — and not solely because England had won the World Cup in 1966. Clubs had recovered from the austerity of the post-war years. Football had become a true national sport. The league was healthy, with a good competitive balance. Not everything was rosy for everyone, but for many young white males it might have been the best time ever to enjoy the game.

In contrast, the 1970s and 1980s were a time of transition and trouble for Britain and football. Economic decline, social unrest, 'hooligan' violence, crumbling stadiums: the game had turned ugly. At least the show kept going, domestically. In European competitions, all English sides were banned for five seasons following the tragic Heysel stadium disaster in 1985. English football experienced a partial stop.

The 1990s led to a fundamental restart. The age of the television had reached its peak. Clubs eagerly sold their souls to the big broadcasters. Satellite transmission allowed matches to be exported as a 'product' to faraway corners of the globe. This globalisation kicked off a second Great Expansion of the game. This time, however, the number of clubs did not grow. What grew instead was the financial power of a few top teams. The new elite of super clubs outgrew their national boundaries. Football became a global sport.

The current coronavirus disease (Covid) pandemic marks the third great stop of football since 1888. All the major leagues have come to a standstill. That such a moment happens so rarely shows the severity of the situation. Slowly, if reluctantly, fans and pundits are learning to accept that current lockdowns do not just mean a delay of fixtures. Covid is changing football.

The uniqueness of today's situation also demonstrates how durable football has been over the years. Whatever happened in the world, soccer experienced a rise and rise in the number of its games, competitions, spectators, sponsors, everything really, including the

number of clubs operating as a professional business. 92 teams in England, another 12 top division sides in Scotland, plus many ‘semi-professional’ clubs, which are in fact run quite professionally. Over 100 pro teams is a lot, even for a country like Britain with 67 million people. In more than 130 years, very few clubs have died altogether. Granted, some once mighty teams are struggling today in the lower leagues. The pyramid system as a whole, however, has never shrunk.

The football industry has coped surprisingly well with recent economic crises. The crash of 2008 took its casualties and dented the growth curve for a while, yet, the game’s main structure stayed intact. Other outside influences, such as the arrival of sheikhs and oligarchs, proved perhaps a greater destabilising force.

Covid will pose a much greater challenge. Crucially, it will pose a different kind of challenge. Economic recessions in the past were scale problems, not fundamental dangers. Television money might have been reduced, but television as such did not disappear. In the same way, the Great Expansion was helped by economic booms, but the key element that elevated football to new dimensions was social change: first nationalisation, later globalisation. The current crisis will alter the fundamentals again.

Like wars, pandemics tend to cause very sudden, dramatic social upheavals. What brought football to an abrupt halt was not an economic problem, which will still come later, but a sudden change in social norms: the necessity of physical distancing and lockdowns. Football is a crowd event. In a world where crowds carry death, the ‘beautiful game’ faces an existential crisis. This is why the coronavirus crisis is different to any other the sport has encountered since 1945.

The coming economic crash will hurt; not only because of its magnitude, but because the football sector is not well prepared for a sharp downturn.

When a recession starts, the first thing to look at is savings. As a rule of thumb, financial advisors typically recommend savings worth about three to six months of regular expenses. In reality, of

course, many cannot afford to save for an emergency in the future when they are already struggling in the present. Some, however, simply ignore such caution. Too often clubs have fallen into that imprudent category, not least because fans urge them to spend every last penny. Arsenal, whose infamous cash reserves usually cover around six to nine months of expenses, have even suffered much ridicule for their caution.

Football has seen a rise and rise in its total income, albeit in a deeply unequal fashion. Even in booming times many clubs are struggling because their regular business is not profitable. Many merely survive by pushing their problems further into the future: piling up debt, selling or ‘factoring’ future income for a lesser cash-out right now, hoping to sell their biggest talents for even bigger fees, hoping for promotion and higher television money, hoping for a rich foreign investor, just hoping that tomorrow’s income will be somehow greater than today’s operating loss.

On the economic field, clubs are playing a game of musical chairs. As long as the music keeps going, everyone is enjoying the dance and hoping for the best. But Covid stopped the music. Suddenly, the reality sets in that there are only a few comfortable chairs for the rich, some wobbly benches for the middle class, and the cold dusty floor for the lower league masses.

The soccer industry faces the same problem as the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008. Even though the property market in general was booming, a significant part of the lower end was in deep trouble. As long as the boom lasted, the bad subprime sector tagged along, carrying over its increasing debt from one year to the next. Until the music stopped. Then, even the profitable segment crumbled, brought down by the weakest link. It took a while for the property market to recover. The good parts survived, the bad parts simply went bust. Later, the financial sector experienced the same. Good banks survived, bad banks went bust, or they became zombie banks: dead inside. Many other industries have gone through this phase. Football might be next.

The coronavirus crisis will be bigger than the crash of 2008.

Even after a vaccine has been found, it will take time until normality returns. Crucially, normality will not mean the same as in the past. This has been a long overdue wake-up call.

First, the current pandemic is not a single event borne out of nowhere. Previous coronavirus diseases such as SARS (2002-04) and MERS (2012-13), or other major epidemics such as H1N1 swine flu (2009-10) and Ebola (2013-16), should have been clear warning signs. Globalisation has increased the world's connectivity, for people and for viruses. Covid will not be the last global health disaster. Other fatal diseases will follow.

The initially complacent response of the Western world to the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, owed a great deal to an underlying racial bias. SARS and Ebola were supposed to be diseases in 'backward' Asia or Africa, not a worry for Western Europe and North America. European football shared that complacency. Some of the last fixtures that took place in March 2020 were grossly irresponsible.

Secondly, there is a crisis even bigger than coronavirus: the climate crisis. In recent summers, while sweating in the intense heat, it finally got into the heads of more and more people that urgent action is necessary. Covid, with its more immediate and personal risk of dying, has pushed the abstract, though altogether more dangerous, climate emergency into the background for now. But the climate issue will not go away. This summer, when the first lockdowns will be relaxed, people might remember the environmental catastrophe when they are still reluctant to go outside because of the unbearable heat.

When 'normality' returns, the rules of social interaction will look different. Until a vaccine has been found and widely applied, which appears unlikely before 2021 or even 2022, crowd events like football will not be back to normal. Even 'behind closed doors' matches seem unreasonable, given the health risk to players, staff, and logistical support. This concerns not only the 22 players on the pitch, but also the 100 or 200 people around them. The morality seems questionable, too. Allowing a contact sport to go ahead

while telling the public to avoid close contact would send a wrong message to all ordinary people still trapped at home.

If, rather selfishly for business over health reasons, football goes ahead ‘behind closed doors’, the success of such matches is far from certain. Psychologically, players would have good reasons to feel inhibited. With the necessary social isolation of the players from their friends and family, kicking about in an empty stadium might mean their hearts and minds are not fully committed. Breathing at each other heavily during a match, they might wonder secretly if all the guys are truly virus-free. After all, coronavirus tests only show results a couple of days after an infection.

It is easy to imagine how ‘behind closed doors’ matches will resemble drab pre-season friendlies, with poor quality and no atmosphere. For novelty’s sake, the first fixture will still draw a big television audience. Once the games lack soul, however, only hardcore fans will keep watching. At some point, clubs might consider it better to cancel fixtures than to taint the reputation of their league with poor quasi-games.

Further into the future, when stadiums will open again, football will feel different. Huge crowds will be restricted and much feared. Imagine the apprehension of the first fans returning to packed stadiums. The chants of the crowd muffled by face masks. The psychological hurdle to return to normality will be high. Precautionary distancing rules might force fans to sit two metres away from each other. With only every fourth or fifth seat filled, a 60,000 seater stadium shrinks to under 15,000 spectators. Temperature checks for fever might be installed at football ground entrances, adding another layer to existing security checks. Public transport around stadiums will be a worry.

From coronavirus to the climate, all the combined changes to our social rules will have a direct effect on the sport in the coming years. Is the Champions League across Europe still a viable model in an age of epidemics and climate emergency? Cheap, frequent flights are the logistical backbone of European competitions. Football might need to adapt to a non-flying future. For health reasons,

flights will be one of the last activities to return to normality. For environmental reasons, airlines might soon face tighter emission restrictions.

Are games still possible during heatwaves in the summer, or in the winter when the virus season is at its most dangerous? The time window with good conditions for playing matches and allowing large crowds might become smaller, essentially reduced to spring and autumn. The fixture calendar might split into a short spring season and a separate short autumn season; a key break from the traditional long season.

Will leagues become smaller and more local as a consequence? Nobody knows for sure today. But these are urgent questions. If football ignores them, events will overtake executives faster than they have the time to reorganise themselves. Those who come too late are punished by life.

Football faces one immediate short-term challenge: much longer lockdowns will soon bankrupt clubs. Then there is the medium-term challenge: a deep economic recession will shrink football's income, made worse by some form of lighter lockdown for another year or two. Finally, there is the bigger long-term challenge: social rules will change in response to new health concerns and the climate emergency. How many clubs will survive in that new order?

After two waves of Great Expansion, led by nationalisation and globalisation, the current crisis could cause a Great Reduction. For a start, this will mean a reduction in money. Player wages and transfer fees will go down. More fundamentally, this might mean a reduction in the number of professional clubs. Three scenarios are imaginable.

First, the worst and most chaotic scenario, the immediate danger is straight bankruptcy. The prospect of no match-day income for months is already putting many clubs in grave danger, especially those without any cash reserves. Even when the highest-earning footballers agree to large wage cuts, the costs will still outrun an income of almost zero. On top of this, a deep recession may put

even television companies and sponsors in danger, forcing them to pull the plug. Entire leagues could disappear in a mass extinction event. It may sound overly dramatic now, but the downturn is just starting.

Second, the intermediate and perhaps most likely scenario is the emergence of zombie clubs: the outer hull still resembles a club as in the past, yet is dead inside. In rich countries, government bailouts will keep clubs on life support for a while. When more pressing concerns spring up elsewhere in society or the economy, however, bailouts for footballers will not stay for long.

The powerful who make it out of the crisis alive will take over the weak. Either formally or informally — sport governance knows plenty of loopholes — soccer could become an oligarchic business model. This process already began before the crisis. Besides its main franchise in Manchester, the Abu Dhabi-backed City Football Group owns teams in Girona, Melbourne, Montevideo, Mumbai, New York, Sichuan, and Yokohama. Red Bull Leipzig and Red Bull Salzburg already met once in the Champions League for their intra-firm derby. More conglomerates like City or Red Bull will be established, buying up more clubs, eventually even within their own league system.

Informal types of conglomerates are another option, such as groups of powerful agents operating as the show-runners inside the clubs. Agent-run companies own the players and shuffle them around teams and leagues based on whatever combination optimises their commercial revenue. Clubs would just be the outer facade. If this sounds far-fetched, remember at some point in the past it sounded equally far-fetched that television executives would one day decide the date and time of league fixtures.

In many European countries, though not in Britain, the traditional variety of this conglomerate approach are B teams and affiliated sides. The second divisions of Europe's major leagues could turn into a 'B Team Competition', a reservoir for the big clubs at the top.

If the first two scenarios, mass bankruptcies and zombie clubs,

do not sound appealing, then there is a need for a third, planned alternative: reduction by design.

The Championship, England's second division and one of Europe's largest, includes 24 teams and tries to fit 46 match-days into a 39-week calendar. Such excessiveness was stretching the limits of the possible already before the crisis. Oversized competitions will be the first to feel the need for reduction. Even leagues with 20 members might be too big in the future. The medical need for longer summer and winter breaks could limit the season to merely 30 weeks. New realities of transport, slower and costlier than before, could make it impossible to play every two or three days. The maximum possible size of a league might be cut down to 16 teams.

The pyramid of the future might be 16 places in both the first and second division, followed below by a semi-professional third division split into three or four regional groups. Such a model could cope with the new order, both financially and logically. Moreover, it could also booster competitiveness.

Football's rise has focused on quantity over quality. Smaller leagues could signal a return to competitive balance and higher standards. Arsène Wenger once observed that the strength of the Italian Serie A as the world's strongest league in the 1980s and 1990s did not rest wholly on money: the Serie A was fiercely competitive from top to bottom, with just 16 teams between 1967 and 1988, four of which were relegated at times. Germany, despite a large population, limits its first and second division to only 18 sides. One reason, in addition to better governance, why German clubs are on a more secure financial footing.

A planned, purposeful reduction in the number of professional clubs requires a strong regulator and close cooperation between clubs and leagues. Before Covid, football knew neither. Crises, however, are big accelerators. What seemed unthinkable yesterday could be the new reality tomorrow. The Great Reduction will be a painful experience, but if football tackles the big questions head-on it could lead to a great renewal after the coronavirus disaster.

¶ *Written in April 2020*

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I.

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