

TERRA

COUNT US IN



GREEN FOOTBALL

Free



Where Football Lives

Stories about the
magic of grassroots
football from around
the world...

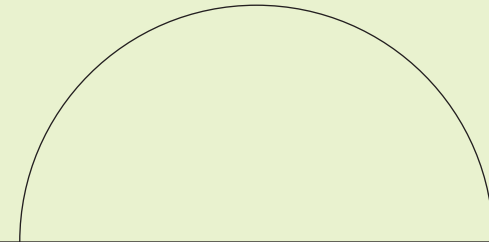
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What's at risk from
extreme weather.





TEAM TERRA



Matt O'Connor-Simpson
Editor-in-Chief
matt.o'connor-simpson@count-us-in.org

Sam Diss
Editor-at-Large
alright@samdiss.com

Alex Mertekis
Art Director
alexmertekis@gmail.com

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
COUNT US IN'S CAMPAIGNS, CONTACT:**

Charlotte Nathan
Director, Brand & Communications
charlotte.nathan@count-us-in.org

Genevieve Margrett
Campaign Director
genevieve.margrett@count-us-in.org

**CONTRIBUTORS IN
ORDER OF APPEARANCE:**

Matt O'Connor-Simpson,
Laura Gates, Liam Hewitt,
Hayley Ladd, Sam Diss,
Dr Jack Layton, Paul
Gilbey, Sumaira Inayat,
Goal Click, Joel Golby,
Dan Evans, Alec Cutter,
Ana Isa Bastos, Victor
Toyofuku, Raiyan
Rafiq, Fay Harvey,
Football Case Study,
Andrea Vilchez, Jinane
Ennasri, Susana Ferreira,
Matthew David Stith,
PJ Smith, Jonathan
Frederick Turton, Jack
Clayton, Will Snapes,
Charlotte Nathan

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Editor's Letter

Football doesn't live in stadiums. Not really. That's football at its most visible, not always at its most vital.

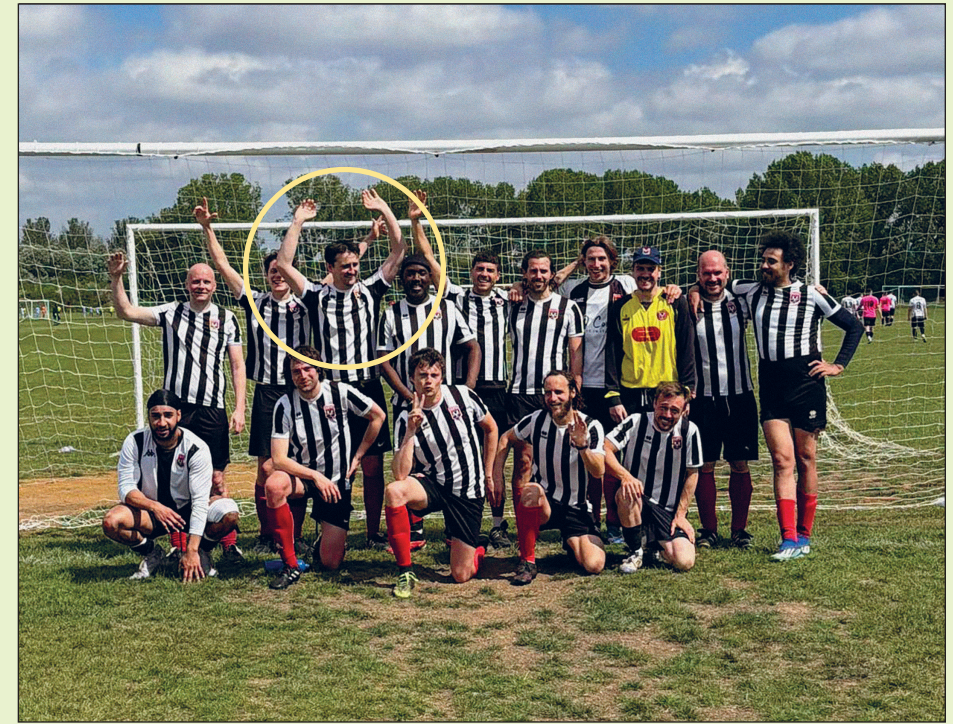
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Football lives on Hackney Marshes, where thousands of grassroots players have descended on East London for almost a century, regardless of the weather or the state of their hangover. It lives on a cage pitch in Casablanca, where female street footballers can dream and feel free. On a dusty field in the shadow of a mountain in Northern Pakistan, and in a makeshift pitch in the Brazilian rainforest, where indigenous people use the game to hold onto who they are. You'll find it in chaotic favela tournaments in São Paulo, and on seven-a-side pitches in Liverpool where those in recovery find meaning in a Thursday kickabout. You'll even find it at Arsenal, where the biggest title win in a generation became a celebration not just of performance, but of place — of being right here, right now.

Although the relentless noise surrounding the top level of the game has made it easy to forget; football is grounded in community, and in the places where communities come together. Jumpers for goalposts. Parks and concrete. The brilliant and the hopelessly untalented, side by side. That's where football lives.

But those places are under real threat.

And when extreme weather, flooding, or toxic air wipes out a game, it's not just ninety minutes that's lost. It's seeing your friends. It's your weekly run-out. It's the thing that gets you out of your head for a couple of hours. For millions of people across the world, football — played or watched, in parks or stadia, week in, week out — is a lifeline. And it rests entirely on the places



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where it happens.

That's what Where Football Lives is all about. The stories in this first issue of TERRA are unapologetically grassroots, but they point to something universal: defending where football lives from extreme weather isn't about keeping football's machinery running. It's a genuine act of cultural preservation.

That's why Count Us In is telling these stories here, in a football magazine, rather than anywhere else. For years we've used culture to bring environmental stories to new audiences. Because we know climate action doesn't take root in activist spaces — it takes root in the places people already know and love. And for billions of people, that place is football. These pages are for them. If you love the game, help protect it.

Read the stories, marvel at Alex Mertekis' design work and then flip to the back to find out more about what we do, why we do it, and how you can get involved.

All the best,

Matt O'Connor-Simpson
Editor-in-Chief





What Football Means to Me

Finding the frame allowed [Laura Gates](#) to reconnect with the beautiful game...



Laura Gates is a photographer. She has published two photo-books on Everton, and a third — documenting the men's team's first season at Hill Dickinson Stadium — will be released in summer 2026.



EVS

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For a long time, I thought my relationship with football belonged firmly on the pitch. When you grow up playing, it becomes your routine — spending hours in school clock-watching until training, anxiously waiting for match-day and then waking up on Monday with an aching body ready to do it all over again. When the time came to leave playing behind, a meaningful chapter of my life closed. Football gave me so much: friendships, relationships, successes, trophies and lots of life lessons. There is a specific kind of quiet that settles in when you walk away from the game; for a while, I worried that I'd lost that sense of belonging for good.

As it turns out, the game wasn't done with me. I just needed to look at it through a different lens.

I dabbled in photography at university but never pursued it as I didn't think I was good enough to carve out a career. Thing is, I didn't know there was so much more to taking photos than I realised. My early work was studio-based or focussed on structures rather than humans. I used to think people in photos 'ruin' a shot. But when I started to focus on Lincoln City, I realised that people, fans and community are what football is truly about.

Years later, when I brought that same perspective to capturing Everton, it changed my life. I'll always be an Evertonian, but my camera allowed me to open up and form friendships globally with fans that travel far and wide to watch the Toffees. It is only because of the power of football, my camera and Everton that I have made friends as far away as Australia and across the U.S. It's incredible.

Picking up the camera again wasn't just about capturing ninety minutes of sport, it became about capturing real, raw community in action. Working on my first photobook then forced me to slow down, to look closer at the faces of fans on matchday, the shared tension, the collective anxieties, the relief and joy of a goal. Documenting their stories helped me rebuild my own.

Then, FC St Helens Women came along. The missing piece of the puzzle. Being around the women's game has re-energised me in ways I didn't see coming. It gave me back the matchday routine I thought I'd left behind, but without the pressure of performance. Instead, it offered the pure, unadulterated joy of being part of a team's journey. It reminded me of why I fell in love with this game in the first place.

Football isn't just a sport, it's a massive, living network of human connections. It's the brief conversation with a stranger in the stands that makes you feel less alone. It's the shared moment with a player running towards my lens after scoring a goal. By finding a new way to exist within the football world, I didn't just find a routine, I found a place, a career, life-long friends. The game gave me joy when things felt dark, structure when things felt chaotic, and a reminder that no matter how long you stay away, you can always come back and feel like you never left.

Visit [@_greenfootball](#) and [@_earthfc](#) on Instagram for more stories about what football means to photographers, creators and fans around the world.

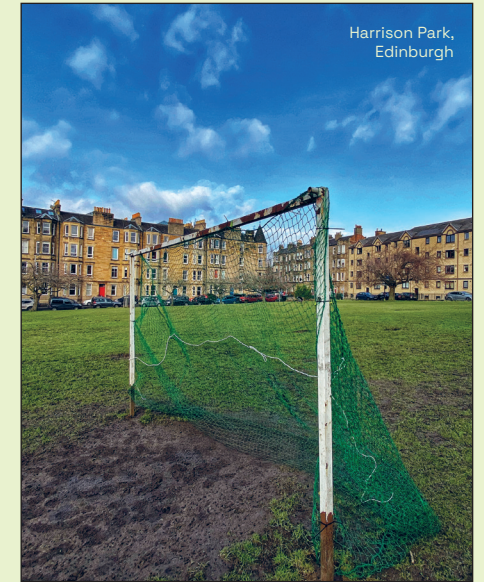
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Portobello, Edinburgh

The Goalposts of Scotland

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Fala,
MidlothianHarrison Park,
Edinburgh

Liam Hewitt is a photographer and South Londoner who now documents the length and breadth of Scottish football culture. From the fiery heart of the Dundee derby, to the muddy, yet picturesque grassroots scene nearer the border, Liam's work proves that no matter where you are, football is never far away in Bonnie Scotland.

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Seafield,
EdinburghRannoch Park,
Grangemouth



The Pitch That Made Me: Hayley Ladd, Crystal Palace & Wales

Wales' fourth most-capped player owes it all to Greenwood Park in St Albans...

"I remember my first football session as a 5 year old, clear as day. It was a mini kickers type session with the St Albans City Youth boys team and I loved it from start to finish. I remember how vast the open space was at Greenwood Park, how you could just run free with the other kids all day. My fondest and most precious memories of football are at those playing fields in my junior years.

It's so important to protect those fields for all young people — they play such a pivotal role in inspiring kids to play freely... and maybe one day, it'll help them fulfil their dreams, too."



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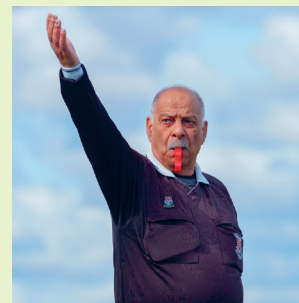
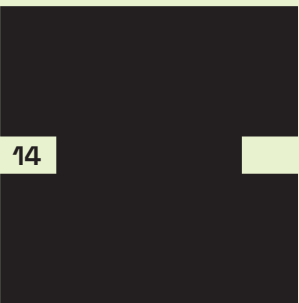
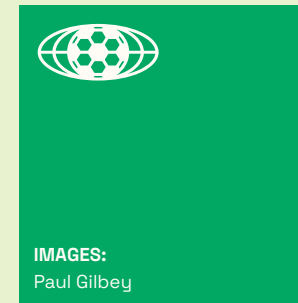
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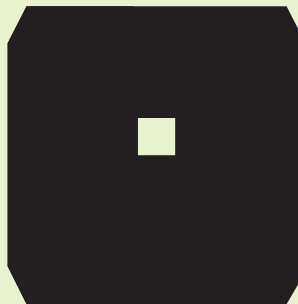
TERRA

THE PITCH IS THE POINT

WHERE FOOTBALL LIVES



We spoke to researcher [Dr Jack Layton](#) whose work argues that amateur football is vital in bringing us together in divided times — a benefit increasingly threatened by our changing climate...





For Jack Layton spent a year of his life getting up early on Sunday mornings to watch men play football quite badly.

What he was watching, he argues, was not about the quality (or lack thereof) but about one of the last places in modern life where community actually works — not as a policy objective or an ideal outcome in a well-meaning strategy document, but as a genuine, durable, muddy, messy fact of life.

Layton studies what he calls “social infrastructure”: the unglamorous physical fabric — bobbly pitches, dank changing rooms, the holy tincture of a post-match drink — that makes it possible for people to continue showing up for each other even during trying times.

And after a year of observation at the iconic Hackney Marshes, his conclusion was simple and, in the current climate, quietly alarming:

When that infrastructure is threatened — when games are cancelled and those tenuous bonds break — its effects can be felt far away from the fields of play...

YOUR RESEARCH IS ROOTED IN THE IDEA THAT AMATEUR FOOTBALL IS “SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE.” FOR THOSE OF US WITHOUT FANCY LETTERS AFTER OUR NAMES... WHAT DOES THAT ACTUALLY MEAN? AND WHY SHOULD ANYONE CARE?

Boiling it down, I think it’s that everyone needs something to do, somewhere to go, and somebody to do it with. The structure of a football league provides all three at once. It creates something for people to do. There’s a place to go and do it. And you have a built-in team

structure — people to do it with. The abstract language that academics reach for — community, kinship, infrastructure — doesn’t land with people in the same way. But if you talk about going to play football with someone, joining in, turning up — it makes those connections feel real and tangible.

And there are three big things it does. The mental health and wellbeing benefits are demonstrable: physical activity and social connection both improve it. Then there’s what you might crudely call social capital — the people you turn to in times of stress, the ones who make day-to-day life easier, who you can call on in a crisis. And then there’s something that I think gets overlooked because it doesn’t sound serious enough: it’s fun. Fun and nice things are what makes living in cities and towns worthwhile. Those aren’t trivial.

YOU SPENT A FULL SEASON WITH YOUR SUNDAY TEAM — STRATTON RANGERS — AT HACKNEY MARSHES IN EAST LONDON, AND DESCRIBED BEING SURPRISED NOT BY HOW JOYFUL IT WAS, BUT BY HOW DURABLE IT WAS. EVEN WHEN RESULTS WERE MISERABLE, WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THE TEAM THAT KEPT THEM TOGETHER THROUGH A MISERABLE RUN OF RESULTS?

That was the real revelation for me. I went in expecting to observe community being made through good times — and there were good times, brilliant ones. But the season I followed was genuinely awful. Losing week in, week out, feuds, tensions within the squad.

¹Dunbar is the famed Oxford evolutionary psychologist who worked out that humans can comfortably maintain around 150 stable relationships — roughly the number of people you wouldn’t feel weird joining uninvited for a drink if you bumped into them. The number is contested, but the underlying idea — that our social capacity has hard limits, and that how we spend it matters — still rings true.



‘You don’t need to programme “community”. You need to provide the conditions for it.’



And rather than asking “Isn’t this an amazing thing?” I found myself asking, “How on earth is this thing still happening?” Any rational person would have walked away. But they didn’t.

The psychologist Robin Dunbar¹ has done recent work specifically on male friendship that speaks to this. His argument is that for men, communication and conversation aren’t necessarily the central things holding relationships together. It’s the act of doing. Physically doing something alongside another person — a drill, a sprint, a last-ditch tackle — creates a social glue that talking doesn’t quite replicate. It’s why the team kept coming back. Not for abstract reasons. But because the doing held them.

IN YOUR WORK, YOU WRITE THAT THERE’S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DOING SOMETHING ALONGSIDE PEOPLE AND DOING SOMETHING WITH PEOPLE. TELL US ABOUT THAT.

Yes, and it’s an important distinction. When I was doing research in parks — watching swimming communities at London Fields, people running in Finsbury Park — you get something real there too. ‘The runners’ nod’ is genuinely a form of solidarity. But it’s qualitatively different from what happens in a team sport, where you are relying on a teammate to cover your back, to make the run, to win the header. That mutual reliance creates something more durable and more binding.

There’s also a historian called William McNeill who studied military history and argued that the sense of brotherhood in armed forces develops significantly through drill marching — through physically moving your body in the same



'I found myself asking,
"How on earth is this
thing still happening?"
Any rational person
would have walked
away. But they didn't.'





‘For men, communication & conversation aren’t...

rhythm as someone else. Something about that shared physical action creates bonds that verbal communication doesn’t. Playing football together captures something of this. You’re co-ordinating, anticipating, trusting. And when it works — when the ball goes in — the eruption of shared joy is, I think, one of the most available forms of collective experience that ordinary life offers.

THE TEAM YOU STUDIED WAS ETHNICALLY AND SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DIVERSE IN A WAY THAT DOESN’T OFTEN HAPPEN ORGANICALLY. HOW DOES FOOTBALL CREATE THAT UNIQUE MIX WHEN MOST INSTITUTIONS FAIL TO?

The Marshes have always had this reputation — the melting pot — and Stratton



...necessarily the central things holding relationships together.’

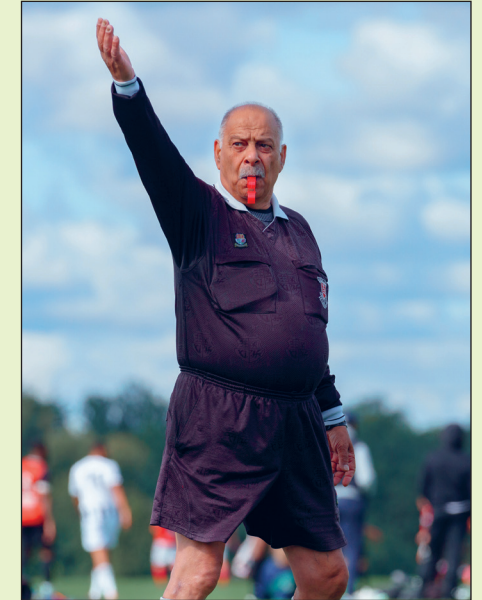
Rangers reflected it. Around 55% of the squad identified as coming from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, 45% as white. Socio-economic backgrounds were spread evenly across the range. And the reason football achieves this when community strategies often don’t is precisely because nobody is being asked to show up in the name of integration. They’re being asked to show up in the name of football.

Age is another one. There aren’t many situations in modern life where you routinely socialise in depth with people of a significantly different age. Policy makers are genuinely agonised about how to create intergenerational encounters. Football already does it. You need the fast young lads on the

wing and the experienced heads at the back. The structure of the game makes that diversity functional.

I’VE SEEN THIS SOMETIMES CALLED THE “WET WEDNESDAY NIGHT TEST.” WHAT IS THAT?

Well, for me, the real test of whether social infrastructure works is whether your investment gets fourteen people to turn up to football — or cub scouts, or a book group — on a wet Wednesday in February. Nobody comes to “build social capital.” They come because the pitch is available, the lights work, and there are (occasionally) hot showers. The drink afterwards does more for integration and social capital than any strategy document ever will.





'A conversation about green spaces & drainage is also...



That's the thing that policy often misses. You don't need to programme "community". You need to provide the conditions for it. Good facilities, affordable access, reliable maintenance. And then get out of the way.

WHEN INFRASTRUCTURE BREAKS DOWN OR BECOMES INACCESSIBLE — THROUGH COST, DISREPAIR, OR CLIMATE DISRUPTION — WHAT HAPPENS TO THE COMMUNITY THAT FORMS AROUND IT?

We had a micro test case during COVID. When access to these spaces vanished overnight, what became acute very quickly was not just the loss of the exercise or the game — it was the loss of the social touchpoint. And for the kind of team I was studying, some of those relationships would simply weaken and dissolve. There are players who, I'm confident, would not still be in contact if they weren't playing football together. Football isn't incidental to the friendship. In many cases, it is the friendship.

Climate disruption raises the same question through a slower, grinding version of the same process. Seasons getting disrupted by rain, heat, drought. The quality of pitches declining. The cost of everything — fuel to get there, kit, weekly subs — all going up. These things chip away at participation, and they don't chip away equally. The people who drop out first when things get harder are those with



...a conversation about whose community gets maintained'

the least margin: those for whom the commute is already a stretch, for whom the cost is already tight. So what looks like a conversation about green spaces and drainage is also a conversation about whose community gets maintained and whose gets quietly eroded.

DO YOU FEEL LIKE THERE'S A TENDENCY TO UNDERVALUE SPORT IN POLICY CIRCLES? YOU KNOW, TO SEE IT AS 'RECREATION' RATHER THAN 'INFRASTRUCTURE'.

Definitely. Partly it's a nerds-versus-jocks thing that goes all the way back to PE at school. I've presented this work in academic settings and watched people who spent their formative years having a genuinely terrible time in sport become visibly resistant to the idea that it matters. And then there's a class dimension, as well: the communities that policy makers imagine when they think about community engagement tend to be slightly older, tend to skew female, tend to fit a certain image of what "community" looks like. The men turning up to play amateur football on a Sunday morning are often assumed to be fine — to not count as the community that needs supporting. That's a serious gap in how we think about urban life.

You wouldn't, for instance, find a local council holding a community consultation at Hackney Marshes, even though hundreds of people gather there every week forming real, durable,

meaningful relationships. The community is visible and present. It just doesn't look like what institutional imagination expects a community to look like.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO FOOTBALL CLUBS — AT ANY LEVEL, FROM SUNDAY LEAGUE TO THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE — ABOUT THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TO THE GRASSROOTS ECOSYSTEM BENEATH THEM?

Football clubs are in a uniquely privileged position. They are relatively wealthy stakeholders anchored in their places in a way that, unlike in the American franchise model, they can't easily escape. A club is in a place. The place gets behind the club. That relationship carries real responsibility.

I think the most useful frame is the idea of a civic mission — the same argument that's been made about universities over the last decade or so. The question is: what are the assets you have access to, how can they support local communities, and what are the relatively small investments and gestures of engagement that would make a significant difference? Good quality green spaces in surrounding communities, accessible training facilities, support for grassroots leagues — these things matter not just to football but to the texture of urban life. A pitch that's well-lit, well-drained, affordable and open is not a luxury. It's infrastructure. And infrastructure is what makes community possible. ■



THE MARSHES DON'T CARE WHO YOU ARE



yards, Bobby Badger cannot be missed. That's why every Sunday morning, when I take a sharp left off Lea Bridge Road, swerve in and out of the joggers and dog walkers and arrive at grassroots football nirvana, it is always his trademark silhouette I am searching for to discover which of the 58 pitches my Bow Badgers are stationed for the day.

But right now, I am not looking at Bobby from a distance of hundreds of yards. He's much closer, sat cross-legged (he does this all the time) by the corner flag midway through the first half. He's waiting somewhat patiently for our opposition to make their subs before he takes the set piece. Once the change has been made, Bobby — in his own time, in his

own world—nonchalantly clips a cross towards the back post.

In front of me, three men with soft physiques and hangovers of varying intensity jump into each other. By some quirk of fate and physics, the ball nestles perfectly on my right foot. I swing a black adidas boot at it, and the net, which I pegged down with some twigs from the nearby trees less than an hour earlier, (Alex forgot the pegs again you see) bulges. Bow Badgers 1-0 Absolute FC. I have scored. I have scored, and I do a kneeslide, punch the air, then sheepishly amble back to my more natural home at centre-back.

You've heard from an observer... but what does it feel like to be in the middle of the action every Sunday morning?

WORDS: Matt O'Connor-Simpson

MY MATE BOBBY BADGER passes the silhouette test. Red socks worn lower than Jack Grealish, fading black-and-white striped shirt with a frankly ridiculous No.99 on the back, a missing front tooth, and a mop of dark hair that sways in the infamous and incessant Hackney Marshes wind.

Even at a distance of hundreds of

For days after, I thought about this moment, because scoring a goal in 11-a-side is brilliant, and thanks to my many sporting shortcomings, I can pretty much remember every time it's happened. Out of all of them — the game-winning penalty on a bog in Wythenshawe, the time an attempted clearance cannoned off my face in a sports complex owned by the Bank of England, my delicate lob at the home of my beloved Gosport Borough — it is this one, a tap-in in Division Three of the Hackney & Leyton League I cherish the most.

Why? It's because from the moment I found those Badgers and first stepped out onto the Marshes, it felt like home — a noisy, bobbly, shabby, joyous, and slightly dysfunctional home.

Even now, the sheer scale and claustrophobia of the place blows me away. On its busiest weekend over 100 amateur matches take place there. 200 teams, with pitches separated by a matter of yards. Maybe as many as 2,500 players, depending on how many dreaded, same-day dropouts the managers receive. These players are male and female, young and old, lifetime Londoners and those finding their place in an often unfriendly city. The Marshes don't care who you are. If you've got the constitution to drag yourself out of bed on a Sunday, and take a plane, train or automobile to E9, someone will chuck you a smelly shirt and tell you you're starting at left-back.

The Badgers' frontline regularly features a 45-year-old who has lived in Hackney Downs their whole life, a 29-year-old from Liverpool who moved to east London for the flat whites, and

either a 20-year-old Polish student surviving an eight-person houseshare or a 46-year-old businessman who lives in Canary Wharf.

When such a diverse cross-section of society meets up like this, interesting things happen. It's cathartic to be a part of and fascinating to watch. To walk around the Marshes in full flow is to experience life itself, and I recommend everyone who has even a passing interest in football (or humans, for that matter) does it.

Jubilation and desolation in equal measure. Improvised humour and minor acts of violence playing out a stone's throw from each other. The stresses of the week and world exorcised with every shanked clearance, misplaced pass, and brutal header. Across the planet this is what grassroots football gives us: a chance to clear your head, form connections, and (sometimes) produce a kind of magic you didn't think you were capable of. At the Marshes, you can see it all in a single morning, and then come back for more again and again and again.

As I write this, the season is over. The Badgers finished midtable, lost a cup final, and Bobby is threatening to leave, like he does every summer. I always become slightly untethered at this time of year, and I'm sure at least some of the 2,000 players who attend Sunday service at the Marshes feel the same.

Soon though, we will be back. Back looking for sticks that can suitably replace net pegs, back at the post-game debrief down the pub, back with people who without football I would never have known, and back emerging from those trees, looking for a shaggy-haired silhouette. ■



AIN'T

NO

NO MOUNTAIN

IS HIGH

ENOUGH

26 Sumaira Inayat is the co-founder of the [Gilgit-Baltistan Girls Football League](#), the first ever league for girls in the North of Pakistan. Her photos & story were created in collaboration with Goal Click, a sports storytelling organisation that finds & supports people around the world to tell stories about their sporting lives & communities.

IMAGES & INTERVIEW: Goal Click

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CAN YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF & TELL

US ABOUT YOUR FOOTBALL LIFE?

My name is Sumaira Inayat and I belong to the mountains of Northern Pakistan (Shimshal). I started playing football when I was 16. I started football with my sisters, and we were the first girls from Shimshal to play football and represent Pakistan in our community games. I also got a full sports scholarship for my undergraduate degree at University of the Punjab, Lahore. At that time football wasn't a common sport and was not really appreciated. Females have to face many societal and financial barriers in pursuing their dreams as an athlete.

Most of the football clubs in Pakistan are in cities, not in the North, and it is difficult for the girls from the North to come to cities for football. Years of experience in the sport and our dream of changing the situation of female footballers in Pakistan motivated me and my sister to start a league (Gilgit-Baltistan

'The bravery & determination of girls is beyond limit.'

Girls Football League). It's the first ever league for girls in the North of Pakistan. GBGFL is a mission aimed at providing sports opportunities for girls alongside their education. The key point about this league is that it covers all the costs (travel, accommodation, food, kits, etc). The idea behind this was to provide girls a platform where they could play without any financial barriers.

WHO IS IN THE PHOTOS? WHERE WERE THE PHOTOS TAKEN?

The photos were taken in the beautiful Passu Valley during GBGFL Season 2 in 2019. In total 8 teams participated from different remote areas of Hunza. These pictures show the brave and courageous girls from Northern Pakistan, breaking stereotypes and fighting for their future. The reason for choosing Passu as the venue for our event was that it lies in the centre of Upper Hunza and on the Karakoram Highway, so it is easily accessible for everyone. The community also supported us in every possible way. Mount Tupopdon, "The Sun-Drenched mountain", also known as "Passu Ca-





thedral” or “Passu Cones”, towers over the tiny village of Passu. Passu is a tiny bastion of humanity surrounded by the overwhelming power of nature.

WHAT DID YOU TRY TO SHOW WITH THE PHOTOS?

Some of our teams come from remote areas with little or no experience or knowledge about sports. We feel great pleasure seeing players from those areas improve and become their best. Their parents and community have been very supportive and want their daughters to become professional athletes. Unfortunately, our country has not been the best compared to other countries and the negligence by our administration makes it difficult to convince the parents to keep supporting them. They're born talented and a little support from their families and our government would do wonders. If you are determined to do something no matter how difficult the challenges you face, you will always succeed. This is what I learned from the girls in our league. Despite the harsh ground conditions the girls are so focused towards their goal.

ARE THERE ANY GOOD STORIES CONNECTED WITH THE PEOPLE OR TEAMS YOU PHOTOGRAPHED?

Despite not even having one proper football ground available in the entire region, these women have defeated all the odds. Seeing such young girls play on a rocky surface, they must have suffered a lot of injuries, as well as having their performances hampered by the dust flying from the barren pitches. The bravery and determination of girls is beyond limit. But not only the players, the



supporters also face issues, as there is no proper sitting area or shade from the harsh weather conditions.

WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEMALE FOOTBALLERS IN PAKISTAN?

Football is still not a very common sport in Pakistan. The ground facilities are bad and expensive, there is no proper system. Cricket is mostly liked by everyone and I believe that cricket has overshadowed other sports, that's why most of the players give up on football. I believe that if the girls are provided better opportunities, nothing can stop them from achieving their goals. To me football is a “life-changing gadget”. The people from my region have played football for a long time. Sports makes them confident and focused towards their goal. We hope and wish that the platform becomes a stepping-stone not only for the girls of Gilgit-Baltistan but the whole of Pakistan. ■



FOR 1 EVENING IN 2017

WORDS: Joel Golby

ILLUSTRATION: Dan Evans

I WAS MAGIC

Joel Golby recounts when the universe made him feel like Eric Cantona during a kickabout in Bethnal Green — and then never, ever again...

If you were to write a scouting report for me as a footballer it would go something a little like this:

“Central midfielder (sometimes right-back, sometimes goes in goal when he’s knackered). Scans regularly, though does not seem to be looking for anything in particular when he does. Lacks pace over first five yards and also all subsequent yards. Communication poor. Perfect first touch three times out of ten times. Tall but grew up wearing glasses so is afraid to actually head the ball. Passes OK but you really need to be tuned into where he’s going to be sending it because it’s clear

very often even he doesn’t know. Can’t believe I’m writing this on a scouting report, but: lackadaisical. Curious positive: his movement is so strange and erratic that he is essentially unmarkable, so literally always in space. Would suit a team made up of 10 other freaks — have we got any more Mesut Özils lying around? — who would play together like aliens. **Grading: U.**”

I know all this. This is why my job is ‘typing’.

Except for one perfect sunny evening in 2017, where something weird happened: I was good. Really good. I was like, ‘Send Wenger down to have a look at him’ good, for no reason, out of nowhere, and not a second of it has been repeated since.



Weavers Fields sits on a slight slope behind Brick Lane. It is not the kind of park people particularly flock to when London is sunny, and it is not flat-enough or has-actual-goals-on-it-enough to be cursed with a particularly organised sport-after-work culture either. Weavers Fields sighs on a different frequency: topless men of indeterminate ages cracking open a can with their backs turned against spiky bushes, children playing indecipherable games that mostly involve 'running', nervous office workers who should never have moved to east London walking briskly home with one of those calorie-counter microwave meals. It is, then, the perfect place to have an impromptu jumpers-for-goalposts, it-doesn't-matter-if-you're-good kickabout after work of an evening which, for one glorious summer, we did every Wednesday.

The first ball went over the top and, for some reason, I shifted out to the left wing, had a lightning turn of pace I've never had before or since, cushioned the ball with the outside of my boot then surged forward for a quick whipped low cross to make it 1-0. OK, cool. Maybe chill out for a bit and go in goal. But no: as I trotted back the ball came to me again and, floating into an abstract CAM position, I held back a defender, made to turn left and actually turned right, rolled a perfect run-onto-it pass out to the wing then burst into the box to finish with a neat low corner drive. 2-0. Inexplicable. Everyone who had seen me play badly for weeks now looked at me in awe. An Eric Cantona-ian shrug. I don't know either.

Sometimes the universe reaches out to tap you on the shoulder. The beam of the light that exists outside

the ether shines itself on you alone. Some people know this feeling to be God, or what they know to be God, some pumping and pulsating ever-present universe-filling every-thing, an all-encompassing mecha-mind from where the scratch that caused the itch that caused our life first came from, that sees all and watches all from afar, never meddling only nudging. Millennia of faith have been poured into understanding that which it is that lies out there in the unending dark and, though I am an atheist in principle, I still quietly believe there to be something, some latent energy of good and evil, stirring beyond in the gunmetal cold. When I've lost my keys or lost my phone or had a particularly bad year of mental health, my lips will murmur in a silent prayer aimed up high beyond: Help me find what I have lost. I'll be good, I'll be good, I'll be good, I promise. And one day for some reason that intent said back: Let's make him really good at football for absolutely no reason at all. For a maximum of 70 minutes. Go on, it'll be a laugh.

And I was glorious. I wove through two huge defenders who worked in performance marketing or accounting or whatever and spun out to the left wing while simultaneously zipping a pass out to the right. I floated all across the attacking three — for some reason, even though I am profoundly right-footed, I suddenly had a wand of a left that day, so stuck to the chalk on the other side of the pitch before — zoom — switching right and running the flank from there, occasionally popping up in the middle to make cute defence-splitting balls with the outside of my foot. I formed a Cole-Yorke mindmeld with Oscar, a guy I sort of worked with a little bit sometimes, all



'Everyone who had seen me play badly for weeks now looked at me in awe.'

no-look passes and an unspoken simpatico we could never have developed in our day-to-day, and we both ran ourselves into the ground bagging four, five, six goals each. My white T-shirt slicked to my body which is how I learned that if you work hard on a football pitch it can do that. Everyone was quiet. They were watching something holy happen, maybe; they were watching, for a moment, a divine thrum through me, down through the black shorts I panic-bought in an airport when I realised I had nothing to swim in, in the Umbro boots that even Umbro doesn't remember they discontinued in 2008, through a scuffed Nike ball from two seasons ago that kept having to be re-pumped.

I was a middlingly-fine shot-stopping goalkeeper as a child, and I once scored a goal at 7-a-side directly off a corner, but beyond that I have spent decades barely being able to kick a football from the penalty spot to the goal line. Then, suddenly and without warning, this happens. Do you know how peculiar this feels? It feels amazing, obviously, but also so jarring you might be sick. Sometimes I watch footballers, galloping on technicolor pitches in the middle of a humid World Cup, and just think: They must feel unbe-

lievable. Imagine how good it feels to ping a corner onto Gabriel Magalhães' head when you were actually aiming at his head? To deck a penalty exactly where you were actually wanting it to go? Mortals though we are, we do not know the true high of Kylian Mbappé as he streaks like lightning beyond a defence, but sometimes — on Weavers Fields, for a second, as the sun sets and the sweat starts to feel cold on your skin — you can almost, almost taste it.

At the pub afterwards I gazed at the city as it lowered itself into the purple hazy lull of a July evening well-spent. Skyscrapers glittered out beyond me. As people peeled away, on bikes or running for dusty late-night buses, every one of them extended a dap to me and said: You were unbelievable today. And I know I was, yeah. But so were you. So were all of you. Rasping a football low across some unkempt grass with the boys then deleting a lager top afterwards — that's what it is to be alive. And for about two hours, once, in 2017, I was more alive than anyone.

Tried to kick a ball back to some kids in a park recently. They were a hundred yards away and it took me three goes. Lo, And Then It Was Over. And Lo, It Has Never Been Back. ■



RAIZ

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Filmmaker [Alec Cutter](#) spent years getting access to the underground amateur football leagues of São Paulo's favelas. He says what he found there was an antidote to what the game was losing everywhere else...

IMAGES: Netflix



You cannot just walk into Super Copa Pioneer — the most prestigious underground football tournament in Brazil — and start pointing a camera at people. But for American filmmaker Alec Cutter — who grew up obsessed with Brazilian football and has spent the last decade documenting its culture — earning that access was the whole point.

His new Netflix documentary series, *The Root of the Game*, follows four teams through the várzea: the favela leagues that have quietly produced 90% of Brazil's professional footballers and operate entirely outside the professional game's orbit. Staged on the outskirts of São Paulo, the amateur competition is where legacies and livelihoods are on the line...

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YOU'RE AN AMERICAN GUY MAKING A DOCUMENTARY SERIES ABOUT NEIGHBOURHOOD FOOTBALL LEAGUES THAT EVEN MOST BRAZILIANS HAVE NEVER SEEN ON TELEVISION. HOW DOES THAT HAPPEN?

By the time a friend took me to a várzea game in 2017, I'd been around a while — I'd had a trial to play for Fluminense and had been living here since 2014 — but I'd never seen anything like it. Maybe you see it on a video game, like *FIFA Street*, and you think you know what it is... And then you're actually standing in it and I felt like I was watching something that was being lost everywhere else. The exclusion, the rising ticket prices, kids who can't get in the door... I knew that was a story I wanted to tell. But I heard something once that stuck

with me: Instead of showing how bad it is, show how beautiful it can be. That's what this is to me.

PAINT THE PICTURE FOR US: WHAT DOES A VÁRZEA COMMUNITY ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE?

So, every club has a headquarters — a proper community meeting spot that is marked on the map and known. Three of the four teams we follow even have their own field. And that image is like a symbol for everything to me: a field surrounded by houses, prime real estate where space is at a premium, and yet... this stays sacred. That's the spot that unites it all. They have youth programmes, they do churrasco together — big BBQs that become a whole culture unto themselves. And each team has an ambassador, like a Godfather figure, who walks down the street and everyone comes out to hear when the next game is. The head of the fan group for one of the teams says in the first episode: *I don't even watch professional football anymore. You guys are everything to us.*

THERE'S A HYPERLOCALITY TO VÁRZEA THAT PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL ONCE REPRESENTED BUT NOW FEELS LIKE A QUIANT RELIC.

The literal name of your neighbourhood is being represented the entire time. You'll see these people at the bakery tomorrow. The players talk about the pressure of that — if you mess up, they'll come find you. But that pressure is the other side of something really powerful: everyone has skin in the game. This is not a team you support from a distance. This is your team for your street and your people.





'The extreme weather hits harder in these areas than anywhere else in the city.'

WHAT'S AT RISK IF THESE GAMES WERE TO SUDDENLY STOP?

These players get paid maybe \$40 a game. If they don't have a game next week, they don't get paid. This is their job. There's a comparison we make in the series: a millionaire professional loses a game, they go home and they're fine. These guys, if they lose — then what? They play for the food on their plate. That's a very real thing.

SO WHEN EXTREME WEATHER HITS — FLOODING, HEAT — IT'S NOT JUST AN INCONVENIENCE.

The extreme weather hits harder in these areas than anywhere else in the city. The infrastructure just isn't there — turf on top of cement, no drainage. The pitch turns into a little lake. Last year in Rio was the rainiest in recorded history. How much these spaces mean to the community, and how precarious they are — those two things are completely linked. If the game gets called off, you're not just losing a match. You're losing incomes, livelihoods. You're losing the thing that holds the week together.

YOU WERE WORKING WITH A TINY CREW IN COMMUNITIES THAT DON'T ROLL OUT THE WELCOME MAT FOR CAMERAS. WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

A lot of times it was just me and a sound guy. And actually the small crew helped — it created intimacy. By the end, peo-

ple said they'd only sign their release forms if it came through me directly. I had to go to some of their houses just to get a signature. You don't just walk in and start filming. You earn trust. And I always had someone from the community with me. We let people know if we flew a drone — if we didn't they might get shot down. You can't ever forget that you're a guest in their space. When it's all done, you should see the messages I've gotten... They're just so proud to have been able to represent.

WHAT DO YOU WANT PEOPLE WATCHING FROM THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY TO TAKE FROM IT?

I don't want us to forget what this sport means at its root. That's the word they use constantly: raiz — roots. They say it fifty times in the series. *This is the roots. This is what we are.* And if you're watching, maybe you only focus on the top five percent. But when that shrinks — and it will — everything above it shrinks too. The cream exists because of everything underneath. I'll be honest, nobody was asking me to make this series. But if we're not actively contributing to protecting the soul of this game, are we just waiting for other people to do it? If you care for this thing, you're going to have to get your hands dirty. ■

The Root of the Game is available to watch on Netflix

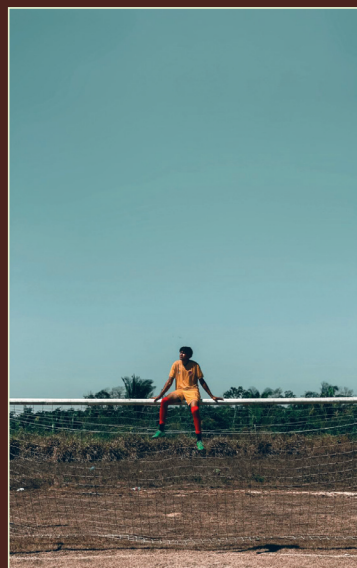


PLAY UP GAVIÃO KYIKATEJÊ!

Inspired by an offensive comment from a football manager, award-winning filmmaker and creative director [Victor Toyofuku](#) began a journey that took him deep into an indigenous community whose devotion to the beautiful game blew him away...



INTERVIEW: Ana Isa Bastos



'You realise football was never separated from their culture. It became incorporated into their reality.'

WHY DO YOU THINK FOOTBALL IS CAPABLE OF GENERATING SUCH POWERFUL STORIES?

Emotion. Sport moves emotion. And emotion moves people.

I always compare it to music. Sometimes you don't even love a song because of the lyrics, but because it takes you somewhere — to a memory, a feeling, a moment. Football does the same thing. It makes people stop for two hours in front of a TV or inside a stadium feeling everything very intensely.

And football has something unique: attention. It's the most popular sport in the world. The entire world stops to watch a World Cup. So you combine emotion with attention. You have millions of people simultaneously open to feeling something.

HOW DID GAVIÃO KYIKATEJÊ COME INTO YOUR PATH?

I was living in New York when I saw a post-match interview with Palmeiras coach Abel Ferreira. He said: "We're organised, Palmeiras is not an indigenous team."

That immediately bothered me. It sounded outdated, disconnected. And then a question popped into my head almost automatically: "Wait... is there an indigenous football team?" So I started researching and found Gavião Kyikatejê. They already had a huge history: FIFA documentaries, major articles, reports everywhere. It wasn't some hidden story.

When I read that the club had been created as an indigenous team, and that their dream was still to keep the squad entirely indigenous, that really hit me. I thought: 'Man, this story needs to be told.'

Then began my journey to reach

Seu Zeca, who is simultaneously the chief, the club president and the head coach. I got his number and messaged him without even knowing exactly what I wanted to propose. I just knew I needed to do something.

During our first conversation, I explained how I felt hearing Abel's statement, and he told me something I'll never forget: his people wanted to publicly respond to Abel, but he was waiting for the right way to do it.

And I said: "Let's not respond with anger. Let's do something bigger. Let's tell your story."

WHEN YOU GOT TO KNOW THE CLUB UP CLOSE, WHAT SURPRISED YOU MOST ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOTBALL?

The entire village breathes the team. It's honestly hard to explain. You walk through the village and see an eighty-year-old woman wearing a Gavião shirt. Then you see kids. Then the boys training. The girls also have their own team — Seu Zeca's daughter even plays in the women's side.

It's like a tiny separated world where only one club exists and everyone supports it. The boys grow up already belonging to Gavião. There, the club isn't just entertainment or something people watch on television. Football runs through everyday life in the village.

The whole experience was incredibly intense. We spent several days in the village, and our perception kept changing the entire time. I had a completely different image of what an indigenous village would look like. And when you arrive there, you realise the reality is much more complex, alive and contemporary than the stereotype people usually carry.



44 FOOTBALL LIVES IN MANY PLACES BEYOND THE BIG STADIUMS. AFTER SPENDING TIME WITH GAVIÃO KYIKATEJÊ, WAS THERE ANY MOMENT THAT CHANGED THE WAY YOU SEE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOOTBALL, TERRITORY AND EVEN THE ORIGINS OF THE GAME ITSELF?

When you're standing on their pitch, in the middle of an indigenous reserve, you understand that in a very concrete way. And somehow it took me directly back to my own origins playing football. When I started playing in Santana, in São Paulo, there was no proper pitch. We played on a sloped cobblestone street. The ball bounced weirdly, rolled unevenly. And that was football.

So being there in the village kicking a ball around with them reconnected me to the essence of the game. Because football is born from that. From improvisation, from coexistence, from people gathering together in whatever space is available. It's not necessarily about stadiums, perfect infrastructure

or television broadcasts.

Football is a social practice deeply connected to the environment where it happens. If there's no space, there's no football. And that became very clear to me there. The professional football we watch today is for very few people. But the football that makes people fall in love with the sport is born precisely in these spontaneous and alive spaces. This project deeply reconnected me with that.

DID YOU ALSO NOTICE THE UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT DIRECTLY SHAPING THE WAY THEY TRAIN AND LIVE FOOTBALL?

Absolutely. The Gavião team blends many elements of Kyikatejê culture into football itself. Part of their training involves wooden logs and exercises connected to the community's traditions. You realise football was never separated from their culture. It became incorporated into their reality.

On our very first day there, we had a fish barbecue using fish they had



caught in the river less than one hour earlier. When the boys turn sixteen, they spend an entire week alone in the forest as part of a traditional rite. There isn't this rigid separation between everyday life, nature and football.

That even affects how they train and organise their routine. They usually train later in the afternoon because the heat during the day is too intense — the climate itself shapes their schedules.

But the most impressive thing is that the entire village lives through the club. Everyone follows it. Everyone wears the shirt. Everyone participates. So football stops being just a sport and becomes almost an extension of the community itself.

TODAY, WE INCREASINGLY SEE EXTREME WEATHER AFFECTING FOOTBALL. DID THE PROJECT CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT AS A WAY OF PROTECTING FOOTBALL ITSELF?

This is already happening right in front

of us. And sometimes we barely notice it. Today, technical breaks due to extreme heat are becoming almost mandatory. Players collapse on the pitch. Artificial turf becomes dangerously hot.

Football is a sport that depends on the external environment. So if we don't protect that, how are the next great players going to emerge? How will kids keep playing in the streets if the heat becomes unbearable?

Football needs to understand the power it has as a platform. It is an influencer. Because when you talk about climate in an abstract way, many people simply tune out. But when you show that climate is directly affecting the game itself, it suddenly becomes real.

The biggest lesson was realising that, for Gavião Kyikatejê, football and territory are intertwined in a very natural way. The team doesn't just represent a village. It embodies a history, a language, and a fan base. When they take the field, it's not just a game. It's a community saying, 'Hey, we're here'. ■



THESE STREETS ARE OUR OWN

WORDS & IMAGES:
Raiyan Rafiq

Arsenal have fans all over the world, but the Gunners never lost sight of where football lives locally...

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Under the railway bridges of Holloway Road, football still sounds the way it used to. It sounds like shopkeepers dragging scarves onto pavement racks hours before kick-off. It sounds like teenagers squabbling outside Morley's over whether the team is finally ready again. It sounds like old men in cafes talking about Rachel Yankey and Leah Williamson, or Declan Rice and Patrick Vieira in the same breath. It sounds like the shutters opening at local businesses that survive because 60,000+ people still walk these streets every other week.

48 Growing up 5,000 miles away from North London, those sounds did not physically exist around me, yet somehow Arsenal still managed to paint a picture of the area in my mind long before I ever arrived here myself. Before I had walked through Holloway Road after a game or stood outside Finsbury Park station watching red shirts disappear into the crowd, Arsenal had already shaped my understanding of what North London felt like. After I moved here, for many nights, especially during periods when homesickness felt heavy, Arsenal became the rescue. Kick-offs became routine, routine became comfort and somewhere between matches and endless post-game conversations, a football club slowly started feeling like familiarity itself. What begins as entertainment slowly becomes memory, ritual and emotional attachment. For some, it becomes family tradition. For others, it becomes a reminder of people we have lost. And sometimes it becomes the thing passed down to those who arrive after us.

What surprised me most was realising the connection was far stronger in real life than I had ever imagined from afar. Arsenal did not simply exist inside the Emirates Stadium. The club lived in the cafes filling slowly before kick-off, in the barber shops debating lineups, in the corner shops preparing for crowds hours before games and in the families making the same walk around Holloway Road every other weekend. The sound of the community is the sound of Arsenal, just as the sound of Arsenal has always been the community itself.

That is why the changes under Mikel Arteta have resonated beyond results alone. The club stopped feeling like an untouchable modern superclub and instead became firmly rooted in the local culture and community surrounding it.

The adoption — at Arteta's request — of "The Angel (North London Forever)" captured that shift perfectly.

*North London forever
Whatever the weather
These streets are our own
And my heart will leave you never
My blood will forever
Run through the stone*

A song that barely talks about football became the emotional identity of the club because it understood the changing streets, disappearing landmarks, working-class resilience and the emotional attachment people maintain to places constantly evolving around them.

Bukayo Saka and Emile Smith Rowe became symbolic in this new era. Hale End youth academy graduates who carried themselves like boys who understood exactly what Arsenal meant to

'A song that barely talks about football somehow became the emotional identity of the club.'





‘The connection was far stronger in real life than I had ever imagined from afar.’



the community surrounding it. Children and adults began recreating their celebrations in the cages, on the streets, in the parks, and even at school.

None of this happened in a vacuum. Long before football clubs discovered the branding value of community outreach, Arsenal in the Community had already spent decades working across Islington schools and estates following the social unrest of the 80s. Welfare calls with isolated elderly residents during Covid and food redistribution partnerships with organisations such as The Felix Project made the Emirates feel more like a part of the borough itself.

Modern campaigns such as No More Red — which tackles the root causes of youth violence in North London — were rooted in local anxieties rather than abstract marketing. It was ultimately about knife crime, disappearing youth spaces and the role football clubs can play in uplifting an area beyond ticket sales and sponsorships.

Of course, the relationship has not been without contradiction. Arsenal, like every modern football institution, remains capable of decisions that can threaten this trust. Redundancies during Covid, alongside certain commercial deals, exposed the uncomfortable and unavoidable reality that even clubs who root themselves in their communities so effectively still have to operate as businesses first to survive the modern football landscape.

Yet perhaps what separates Arsenal from many elite clubs is that the connection to North London survived those tensions rather than collapsing beneath them. Because this relationship was never built purely through





'When homesickness felt heavy, Arsenal became the rescue.'

success. It was built through repetition and routine, through generations of supporters attaching memories to eateries, tube stops, market stalls and the walk towards the Emirates itself. The stadium matters, of course, but football has always lived beyond it, and defending those spaces, rituals and communities is essential if the game itself is to continue thriving.

That is why the recent scenes around the Emirates have felt so emotional. Families standing on balconies filming crowds below them. Strangers embracing outside corner shops. Children climbing onto traffic lights just to catch a glimpse of the crowd. Thousands gathering around the stadium simply wanting to feel close to something collective at a time where life increasingly feels individual and disconnected.

Maybe that is what football protects at its best. Not simply clubs or trophies, but the communities and rituals built around the ecosystem. The restaurants that fill before kick-off. The businesses that survive because match day still exists. The conversations drifting beneath railway bridges after full time. The feeling that, even as the city changes around you, some things still belong to the people who built them.

The manor might be changing, but the people still remain. ■



THE GIRLS HAD THEIR HANDS UP

Inside a small women's football club in Casablanca, the game is teaching young girls what they're capable of...

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WORDS: Fay Harvey

IMAGES: Andrea Vilchez, Jinane Ennasri, Susana Ferreira, Matthew David Stith

This is an edited extract from "For Girls in Casablanca, Dreams of Football Go Beyond the Pavement", originally published by Football Case Study.



The question “what do you want to be when you grow up” has been haunting young people for ages. As a small child, hearing this

question felt like looking into a movie about your life with a hundred different cutaways. But as the years move and the limbs extend and your responsibilities start to stack, this curiosity becomes an existential threat. Having your name up in lights feels out of reach. We begin leaning towards the mundane.

At least, that is what I thought people felt. When I met the Moroccan girls of youth football club Amiad Al Hkalil Arryadia, they proved to me that with the right support system, obtaining your dreams doesn't have to feel like catching lightning in a bottle.

We met the team by chance, passing their practice field on the way to a WAFCON match. In the corner of our eye, colourful figures leaning against a classically coloured beige Casablanca wall jumped out at us — girls in pink and white football kits stood alongside a coach in a navy blue tracksuit. The group looked as though they had been painted on the wall and had been a part of the city since forever.

Within Casablanca, football-related things — players, jerseys, footballs, graffiti, advertisements — are more prevalent in the streets than almost anything else. But one might notice that young female players engaging in street football, though not completely absent, tend to be a rarity. This is precisely why we asked our driver to pull over.

Benchkir Abdrrahim, the man standing beside the girls, happily greeted us. He is not only the team's coach but the president of the club, which he formed



in 2019 after noticing his son and daughter developing a deep love for football, building it step by step in his hometown out of his own pocket and the donations of parents. He invited us to return for a training session.

Sitting in a circle formation on the turf one week later, the girls humoured me as I asked them questions unrelated to football. Shy but very polite, they

‘It was football that brought the girls not only confidence, but certainty.’

fiddled with their hands and didn't hold eye contact for long — until the age-old question came.

Expecting the girls to hesitate, I took a second to look down at my notes. When my head bobbed back up, I was surprised to see many of the girls had their hands up, ready to answer in an instant. Ahlam, the 14-year-old captain who fell in love with football through her father, said she hopes to be an ambassador. Others mentioned dreams of becoming a doctor. But the dream of being a professional footballer was primary and, most importantly, possible. In the same future-telling fashion, the girls assured me that, within ten years, their club will be as grand as Real Madrid and Barcelona — and they want everyone included. Even boys.

It was football that brought the girls not only confidence, but certainty. Up until that point the conversation had felt like ticking off boxes with a nurse in a waiting room. But once football became the topic, it was direct answers, eye contact, and an eagerness to share their personal connection to the field.

As he sat on a bench from afar, Benchkir looked at his team with an aura of quiet pride. “I feel like a father figure to them when we are at the field,” he said, “and the least I can do is make my team feel independent, well-rounded and, above all, strong.”

A handful of the girls agreed that when they first began enjoying football, their mothers had little idea about their routines. Now their mothers ask

questions about practice and prepare small gestures devoted to their training — packing extra snacks, laying out their kit. As Ahlam put it, discussing football is a way to bridge the gap between the pitch and home.

Two weeks later, after a WAFCON match where Morocco beat DR Congo in Rabat, I walked out of the stadium into live music and a swarm of people gathered to dance. A group of Norwegian girls we'd met before the match — in Morocco to support the Atlas Lionesses for the first time — were in the middle of the mayhem, surrounded by Moroccan fans, bright smiles on their faces as they danced among strangers that had turned into family. On the edge of the pulsating circle, packs of girls from youth football clubs across Morocco danced with one another, mirroring each other's two steps the way they connected passes and covered each other's backs on the pitch.

The scenes reminded me of something Hicham, a Moroccan father who'd watched the whole country change around this sport, had said before kick-off: “This tournament shows that women can succeed in football the same way men can. There are no limits.”

When I asked Benchkir where he sees the future of women's football in Morocco, his perpetually pensive expression morphed into certainty. He said he hopes for two things:

For football to be second nature to girls, and for the taboo that women cannot play football to vanish entirely. ■



WHEN IN DOUBT, PRACTICE OPPOSITES



Damien John Kelly House is providing hope (& the odd slice of cake) to those in recovery through football in inner-city Liverpool...

WORDS: PJ Smith

IMAGES: Jonathan Frederick Turton

When is football not really about football? When we at Damien John Kelly House play every Thursday afternoon, in Toxteth, Liverpool Eight. Seventeen men, in recovery from addiction, live there. It's one big house in nearby Wavertree, and a former police station and pub, ironically enough. Two floors. Nine rooms upstairs, eight downstairs. A tight ship is run. It has to be.

One resident is about to reach 12 months clean and sober. It'll be the first time in his adult life. He's now a devoted dad and partner. He's got real leadership qualities and has become interested in personal growth. This wasn't the case when he first moved in. His aggression and temper came out on the pitch. He's a great footballer. Big strong playmaker, with quick feet and an eye for a defence splitting pass. He's played at a decent level, where that menace will have served him well. Not anymore, though. We had to talk to him about it. We had to ask him not to play if he couldn't keep a lid on it. We were there to help him, but we couldn't keep repeating the same pattern. Thankfully, he got his head around it. He understood that it wasn't the scoreline that was important here. As a result of maturing on the football pitch, it's had a knock-on effect. Miraculously, he's now a calming influence on some of the newer, younger residents. He's far more open to different routes to recovery as well. A regular attendee at book club, breathwork sessions, AA meetings. He even or-

ganises a monthly meal for everyone at a local restaurant. Football, eh?

People like him arrive here via various routes: rehab, detox, prison, word of mouth, social media, whatever. It doesn't really matter. The thing they all have in common is that they are lost and have had enough of the way they've been living. We go by a (half joking) motto of 'When in doubt, practice opposites'. We tell the lads: 'Whatever you've been doing hasn't worked, and it's unlikely to ever work, so it might be time to do the opposite'.

We have quite a varied weekly schedule: circuit training, film club, cycling, therapy, house meetings, one-to-ones, cooking, art, guest speaker groups, and more. It's never, initially, about 'the thing'. People are simply encouraged to join in, open their minds, connect, belong... and then, hopefully, they get into it eventually. But whether 'the thing' is a new appreciation of world cinema, finding themselves via the therapeutic groups, or getting into photography, for every session, there are a few people who initially dislike it. Or they don't understand it. Or can't see the point of it. As time goes by, that resistance usually melts away.

For our weekly football sessions, there wasn't much resistance to begin with. Most of us cycle from Wavertree to Toxteth at 11:50 every week for a 12:30 kick off. The pitch itself is situated at an old fire station that's now a real community hub featuring a youth club, gym, café, and a couple of outdoor, seven-a-side football pitches.

**'If you're injured,
grab a camera.
If you're not into
taking photos,
you're the ref...'**



It's surrounded by rows of houses, a newsagent's, and a brilliant community owned cafe called Squash. The good folk who run the place are all female artists. We go over most weeks for a ginger shot and a slice of cake.

There's no opting out of the game—not that anyone wants to. If you're injured, grab a camera. If you're not into taking photos, you're the ref. If that's not for you, make sure you've washed the bibs, and sorted all the balls out. You get it?

Addiction is about separation. Recovery is about connection. Here, we make an effort to join in. Our lives depend on it. This stage is about rewiring the brain. No opting out because you can't be arsed. No giving it a miss because you're tired. We're a team, and we all have to step it up a bit. The game itself is about inclusivity. We're all at different levels, playing-wise. Some really talented players. Some have never kicked a ball before. Some even like rugby. But we all seem to get the same

buzz off it and we work hard to make it happen no matter what. Not enough players? Pitch double booked? Bibs not been washed? Ball's gone over the wall? We'll find a way. There's no crazy slide tackles. No screaming at each other. Just the power of running around for an hour, getting a sweat on, with your mates, and scoring a few brilliant goals.

Perhaps the only thing capable of ruining our Thursday afternoon is the weather, particularly during rainy and icy months. We can adapt and sort another activity out but when football is cancelled, a vital cog in our recovery wheel has been removed. And if we're not as focused as we need to be, more cogs can be subconsciously removed, too. I'm not saying that being unable to play football on a Thursday leads to relapse. It doesn't. However, it does interrupt routine and structure. It's one less bit of exercise as well, and less time *doing something* with your mates.

No more buzzing off wild free-kick routines, and while we could find oth-



'When football is cancelled, a vital cog in our recovery wheel has been removed.'

er ways to amuse ourselves, this is not enough. Our whole ethos is based around art, sport and culture, underpinned by an uncomfortable look in the mirror. Football is key to that, but there is nothing we can do about the weather. It's at least a lesson in acceptance.

We're lucky that we don't really get long bouts of extreme weather here (yet?). If we did though, and our games became sporadic, it would definitely hinder our progress in recovery. Of course, people can recover without playing football. Most do, in fact. But everyone needs access to the things they enjoy and we enjoy playing football, if you hadn't guessed. We need to

look after ourselves, our environment and surroundings. It's just common sense, really.

Here's just one more example of how football can change lives. It's February 2026. We're playing our usual game, and noticed a fella watching us from the street. He looked engrossed. We were a player down, so invited him to join us. It quickly became apparent that English wasn't his first language. We managed to communicate enough to find out that he'd recently arrived as a refugee from Gaza. He absolutely loved football and knew how to play. Since then, he's become our friend. We make sure he's kitted out in quality gear. He's been to the cinema and theatre for the first time in his life. I've taken him to Everton's new stadium a few times. One time, he even went in the lounge and enjoyed a seven course meal (thanks, Jimmy). He's now got a bike, safety, friends, a sense of belonging and is holding onto hope.

Imagine if our game would've got called off due to the weather that day? ■



HOLDING BACK THE FLOOD

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Jack Clayton investigates the financial, social & emotional cost of flooding on UK football...

Late September 2024. From above, AFC Wimbledon's Cherry Red Records Stadium looks like the kind of mad painting you might see in the Tate Modern; as if a Goldsmiths or Saint Martin's graduate has hurled a can of yellow paint at the corner of a giant green canvas. Down on the ground, the playing turf of The Dons' Plough Lane home more closely resembles an enormous Ryder Cup bunker. Severe flooding and subsequent pitch collapse are to blame.

Overnight on the 22nd September, across the course of just nine hours, more than two inches of rain had fallen in this area. And if that sounds like a lot, it's because it is — almost three times Wimbledon's average rainfall for the entire month, in fact. This huge downpour of water has led to drains backing up overnight, the appearance of a large sinkhole on the South West London surface, and the subsequent cancellation of two home fixtures, including a League Cup tie with Newcastle United. Without a JustGiving page, which eventually raised close to £150,000, more matches might have been lost too.

For football fans who feast exclusively on the riches of the Premier League, the story of a League Two (now League One) side's pitch being affected by bad weather might seem par for the course. The reality, though, is that in a world of increasingly extreme weather, what happened at the home of the Wombles two years ago was merely the tip of the iceberg. And as you travel further

down the footballing pyramid, away from the bright lights of the professional game, the impact of extreme weather caused by climate change comes into even sharper focus.

Take the story of Hereford FC. The non-leaguers, who ply their trade in the National League North, had to postpone seven league matches during the 2025/26 season. Following an exceptionally wet winter, which included a battering from Storm Chandra, the West Midlands side known affectionately as the Bulls faced a drainage crisis at their Edgar Street stadium that sent their season into a spin. It was one that they only just escaped from, with intense fixture congestion, mounting financial pressures, and the temporary relocation of home games combining to make their relegation battle even more of an ordeal. On the final day of the season, in front of 4,500 fans, a 2-2 draw with Peterborough Sports secured their National League status for another season.

Will Snapes, 27, is the Head of Community for Truro City Community Trust. Born in Truro, he's played football in Cornwall since he was just seven years old. In the last 10 years, he's coached various youth levels and even worked as a Football Development Officer for the Cornwall FA. He's as woven into the fabric of the game here as it's possible to get. In a county with no professional football team, Will has seen first-hand how extreme weather is coming with a financial and social cost for the clubs representing Cornish communities like Falmouth Town, Mousehole A.F.C. and Will's own Truro, who sit at the

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top of the tree in tier six of the English football pyramid.

“At youth level, we had 1,275 postponements out of 4,642 games played. At the women’s level, we had 99 postponements out of 212 games,” Will tells me. “If you look at stats, that’s nearly 2,000 games over the course of the year that have been postponed due to the weather down in Cornwall.”

For football clubs of modest means, the spreadsheet implications of so much weather-affected football can be dire. With sponsors wanting value for money and match-day income drying up, there’s a knock-on effect of the wider environmental issue that Will is only too aware of.

‘For football clubs of modest means, the spreadsheet implications of so much weather-affected football can be dire.’

“If there’s long periods where teams go 10 or 12 weeks with no fixtures, that’s three months of no games, no income over the gate, no income over the bar. No player subscriptions going into the club. If clubs are losing out on that money, and also that cash flow during a two to three month period, if they’ve got bills to pay or rent to pay or leases to upkeep or licences to pay for, it leaves them at massive, massive loss,” Will explains, before talking me through how semi-professionals often bear the brunt of this.

“Players are missing out on wages and income. It might not be anything big. It might be 20 quid a game or 40 quid a game or 100 quid a game,” he says. “Some grassroots players will be reliant on that money to pay for their rent, pay for bills, pay for university tuition, whatever. If they’re having pro-

longed periods where they’re not playing football and they’re missing out on that income, it’s massive for them.”

Of course, many of us can only ever dream of being paid even small sums to play football. But the inclement weather and subsequent postponements, as Will points out, are now impacting engagement and testing amateurs’ willingness to commit to the sport.

“It does just lead to people losing interest,” he tells me. “If I’ve not played football for a couple of weeks and it leads to me losing fitness, I might start thinking: do I really want to go back and train? Do some runs during the week? Or, do I just leave it? I might just say that I’ve got an injury or a family event on. They are the realities of what goes through football players’ heads.

“We need the younger generation of players to want to stay committed to then feed into the game, and be there for a long period of time, and keep these clubs and teams running and going.”

For those not emotionally invested in the game, it can be hard to gauge what’s lost when the football goes.

“You really can’t put a value on going to a football match with your mates, or just enjoying yourself and cheering on and supporting your team. It’s that little bit of release that people need from work or family life or just the stresses of life in general,” says Will. “From a playing point of view, that camaraderie that you get being amongst the team and being amongst people that you’ve known and grown

relationships with over a long period of time can put that little smile on your face that you need after a tough week.”

With clubs struggling to make ends meet and facing existential threats, and talk of effects on mental health, the doom and gloom is palpable. Will isn’t writing the obituary for grassroots football in England’s southernmost county just yet, though. Far from it. Amongst the dark, he strikes a cautiously optimistic note around resilience, sustainability and collective action. His is a vision for the future where teams help each other out, and work together to build the infrastructure that’s needed. Less dog eat dog, more cross-collaboration, long-term planning and getting the funding for climate adaptation projects.

‘Inclement weather & subsequent postponements are now impacting engagement & testing amateurs’ willingness to commit to the sport.’



“People within football make stuff happen regardless of what’s available to them or the challenges that are posed to them through the weather,” says Will. “The more cohesion there is, the better network there is within grassroots football clubs, the better they operate. Football is always seen as such a tribal thing. You’re always fighting for the same players, for the same income, everything... My hope is that people will focus on how they can support other clubs because, in turn, that will then mean that the quality of grassroots football in Cornwall rises together.” ■



Our Campaigns



This zine is brought to you by Count Us In, a charity delivering campaigns to unleash the power of football to defend the game from the threat posed by climate change. We're behind the campaigns Green Football and Earth FC.

We're reframing climate action as cultural preservation: we make the climate conversation about celebrating and protecting football

culture and the communities football lives in.

Football has great social and cultural importance with long traditions and community impact across generations of fans.

Through the stories, voices and culture of football itself, we show the football community that safeguarding it for future generations is, in fact, climate action.

That means if you love football, you have a responsibility to care for its future.

IMAGES: (Clockwise from top right)

01. Rio Ferdinand x Green Football
02. Brazilian World Cup winner Edmilson & women's national team legend Pretinha x Terra FC

03. Prince William x Terra FC
04. The Rest Is Football interviews Héctor Bellerín for a special in aid of Green Football
05. Demi Stokes x Green Football

Green Football

Green Football exists to protect football's future by caring for the pitches, communities and places the game depends on.

We're a UK not-for-profit campaign unleashing the power of fans, clubs, players, schools, broadcasters and grassroots to tackle climate change and protect nature.

Green Football helps to drive the conversation about climate change in football, while supporting practical action to both tackle climate change, and to adapt to its impact.

Green Football founding members: Count Us In, Exceptional, Final Third, The Football Supporters' Association, Pledgeball, Sky Sports, TNT Sports | greenfootball.org

Adaptation

We can help the places where football is played withstand the extreme weather, keeping pitches, parks and community spaces safer, stronger and playable.

Together with Football for Future, we've issued a practical Adaptation Toolkit for grassroots football, as a clear, action-focused guide for clubs, coaches, and communities facing extreme weather.

You can also help to support adaptation projects by donating to our adaptation fund. This will help to protect and future-proof the grassroots spaces where football lives, so the game stays playable for generations to come. wherethefootballlives.org/adaptation

Earth FC

Green Football's sister campaign, Earth FC, is a global football campaign built around the idea that there is no football without the planet. It brings clubs, players, fans, cities and partners onto the same team, raising awareness of how extreme weather is affecting the game and supporting action to protect the places where football lives.

In Brazil, as Terra FC, our work includes the Climate Break, launched with the Federação Paraense de Futebol during the 2026 Parazão tournament, reframing the hydration break to raise awareness of how extreme

heat is already affecting football.

Ahead of COP30, Brazilian football sent a message to world leaders: there's no football without the planet. From clubs including Botafogo, Flamengo, Fluminense and Vasco taking to the pitch with Terra FC, to 45 football legends, creators and public figures coming together for the Game for Earth, football united to call for action to protect the pitches, people and places that make the game possible.

In Mexico, Tierra FC is bringing together clubs, players and the wider football community to grow the conversation and inspire action to defend where football lives. | earthfc.org

EXTRA TIME

03



Football isn't just a sport people consume. It's a place they live.

As part of a sprawling season-long research project, Count Us In spoke to fans all over the world about the power of the game, why it continues to resonate, and to find out what exactly is at threat when extreme weather stops play...

Over the course of several weeks, we had in-depth conversations with 25 fans from all over the world about what football meant to them — men and women, old and young; people who play, people who watch, people who organise, people who grew up with the game and people who came to it late.

And what seemed on the surface like a simple enough question began to reveal connections as unique as the people themselves.

We spoke to a young man who found non-league football as a way to come to terms with his neurodivergence and to a retired couple in the north of England who've sat in the same seats at Derby County for decades and count the people around them as family friends.

We spoke to people for whom football was a way to cope with death and divorce, with illness and addiction, with shaking off the shackles of a job they despised and with the very particular kind of eyeball-rattling brain-rot that comes from staring at a glowing metal rectangle superglued to your hand all day.

None of these people saw the link

between climate change and football at first.

But all of them — every single person we spoke to — understood what was at stake if extreme weather conditions put their game at risk. From there, the link became crystal clear.

We didn't go into our research with assumptions to confirm. We just went in looking to understand what makes people gravitate towards football and how we can best communicate the very real threats to the sport fans hold so close to their hearts.

Because the thing we're trying to protect — the social fabric that football holds together, the green spaces it grows from, the communities it anchors — belongs to the people who live inside it. And you don't make decisions about someone's home without asking them first.

What we heard, over and over, was the same story told in different accents. Three distinct themes emerged. And together, they have shaped our approach — grounding the abstract in the personal: from how football needs to become more climate-resistant to how fans need a more climate-resistant football.



01 — Football As Social Infrastructure

The game's value isn't in the 90 minutes. It's in everything that hangs off them — the structure it gives a week, the conversations it makes possible, bonds it forms and the barriers it breaks. It becomes an invisible support network without anyone ever calling it that...

INSIGHTS

Football is one of the few things that gets us out of the house and into the same room as other people. It is — in the words of several fans we spoke to — a ritual. Not in that “Do you put your left sock on before your right?” nonsense. But miss one game and you miss your mates, miss a run of them and you can feel the ground shift under you. That's real.

The game provides what no doctor can prescribe: consistent, effortless contact with other people. Fans described games that were, on paper, boring. Not every team can be a winner. But for many, sport is often about something else entirely — old friendships, shared memory, the comfort of showing up somewhere you're expected.

“Funny thing to say, but football matches are like funerals that happen every other week. You get to a certain age and, at a funeral, you say ‘We should get together more’. With us — the match is the reason we do.” — *Everton fan*

“We're a team of amateurs. A group of strangers who win and lose together and at the end of it, we go get dinner either way.” — *Sunday League player*



For many of us, playing football is the only time we're not checking our phone. The only time our brain actually switches off. You head out into the cold — even if you're on the bench or just watching your mates from the sideline — you're locked into every kick. Even Premier League football struggles to hold our attention that way.

Football can create low-stakes small talk that opens into real conversations. As one fan put it, "Once you've cleared the first hurdle of talking about why Danny Mills can't run anymore — you move on to 'how are you, really?'" For him, it provides people a safe, judgement-free environment in which to talk.



02 — Hyperlocality

We love football wherever we might find it. But what really sticks with us — the thing that makes us really care — is not found in the abstract. It's in a love we have for a specific pitch, a particular meeting place, a route to a ground we've walked so many times we've stopped noticing it and it becomes pure muscle memory.

"Hackney Marshes used to have 77 pitches. Now it's got 58. That's not just a number. That's significantly less Sunday mornings people were counting on."

— Sunday League player

"Without the football club, we'd lose the last bastion of community spirit — where people can get together for a drink in the name of something. In the name of connection that nothing else gives you." — Welsh fan

INSIGHTS

The places where football lives — the parks and pitches and small stadia — are under pressure. In winter, floods close grounds. In summer, heat makes pitches unplayable. Councils cut maintenance. These are not abstract climate statistics. They are the slow removal of specific places that specific people depend on.



The loss of a local pitch is not initially felt as an "environmental issue" — but it can be with the right framing. Instead of seeing issues like flooded pitches as a "climate story", fans interviewed instinctively framed them as a "football story". Broad threats like "rising sea levels" can feel distant or impersonal. Whereas when we moan about how a rain-cancelled match ruins our whole weekend, the threat becomes immediate and visceral and very real.

The meaning of grassroots spaces is about more than just a place to play. One fan we spoke to — a Midlands-born, Pakistan-raised Muslim

woman — said she doesn't always feel welcome in traditional football environments. To her, outdoor spaces feel safer. More open. Less intimidating. Now her friends meet for a picnic iftar in the park near the stadium two hours before kickoff.

In places of crumbling institutions, football is one of the few places communities have left. A supporter from South Wales described the particular texture of what football means in their post-industrial hometown — places where the mine and the tin works went, and then the rugby went, and now football is all that's left.



03 — Stewardship

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Football clubs have always drawn on the communities around them. They were once teams that represented churches and factories and groups of friends who met up in smoke-filled pubs and decided to take on that pub up the road. But the question looming over modern football is what clubs are willing to give back to the places that made them — and how they can do it in a way that goes beyond mere box-ticking.

“The football club has replaced the church as a pillar of the community. Who’s going to run a food bank? The football club. Or its fans at least. It stands to reason that they should be stewards of green spaces in the club’s catchment area. It’s a direct impact on the community they serve.” — Chelsea fan

INSIGHTS

The idea of stewardship can be a richer frame than activism or charity. It places clubs and fans as custodians of the spaces that football grows from and the idea resonated strongly. “Looking after something because it’s yours” and “passing this on to the next generation” were topics that struck at the hearts of fans.

Fans broadly understand that clubs have a responsibility to the communities around them. But fans often don’t trust them to go beyond box-ticking. “Energy-saving light bulbs” and “vegan sausage rolls” don’t register as care in the same way reinvesting in local pitches, clubs, and green spaces does.

Community isn’t just a marketing buzzword. An Arsenal fan who runs a popular supporters group talked about the club beginning to recognise the cultural value of its grassroots fanbase beyond merchandise collaborations or branded content. Something with opportunities to really join in. Things like: “Here are Sunday League clubs in our catchment area that need players” or “Here are ten pitches in Islington that matter.”

Fans noted that stewardship was “the logical extension” of what clubs already do. Clubs already run food banks, community programmes, and youth camps. Taking on stewardship of green spaces and supporting those who rely on them applies the same logic. “It just makes sense,” said one Premier League fan. “And they’d win a huge amount of goodwill by doing it.” ■

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO



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The Premier League
The Professional Footballers’ Association
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PLEDGEBALL
PROTECT WHERE WE PLAY

sky sports

TNT SPORTS

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