



Follow the money

John Old



The editor of this journal knows better than to argue with me about soccer, as I have one irrefutable position to fall back on: I was there. By 'there' I mean Wembley for the World Cup Final of 1966; more specifically, behind the net where Geoff Hurst scored *that goal*. So don't talk to me about technology: I know what I saw.

But the odd thing is that these days I don't give a monkey's about international football. No, that's wrong: I actually dislike it and wish it would go away. Once upon a time I would feel pride if a player from the team I supported were selected for an international, or a sense of personal affront if they were dropped. Now I groan if they get the call-up, and pray that they don't play in case they end up injured or worn out. It's an attitude that was probably best expressed by a Liverpool fan who, when asked "Would you rather Liverpool won the Premier League, or England the World Cup?", answered: "I'd rather Liverpool won a throw-in."

It's fans like us that people like FIFA probably don't like, as they reckon we are helping to make the clubs too powerful, and that we will be the death of the international game. Where's our patriotism?

But this attitude is not unique to soccer, nor to England. No-one could accuse Americans of a lack of patriotism. Yet apart from a four-yearly outburst at the Olympics, and to a lesser extent the Ryder Cup, and despite the huge money that American sports fans are willing to spend, they stubbornly insist on following what to the rest of the world appear to be arcane and minority sports, and don't seem to miss 'international' competition. And cricket fans from the subcontinent are among the most passionate in the world, but the big money is flowing into the IPL, not Test cricket.

Oddly, while I wish international soccer would go away, I'm quite keen on following international rugby, unlike some of my friends, who follow their club teams and, mirroring my view of soccer, get annoyed when their players are unavailable because of

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internationals. When I say 'keen', I mean in the sense that I'll watch the game if it is available on free-to-view TV. I wouldn't dream of paying a subscription to watch it, and I've never, in fact, paid good money to watch a rugby game in my life. Aye, there's the rub, for in 1966 my World Cup ticket was priced at 12 shillings and sixpence. That's about £7 in today's money. Premier League tickets now regularly cost between £30 and £50, and the keen home and away supporter probably spends thousands every year on following their team. And as behavioural economics tells us, the more something costs, the more it's valued. But if people are parting with their own money, they want to believe they're getting good value. They'll pay to watch 'their' team, or to watch the best, no matter what the nationality, but they are less interested in spending out on something just because it's wrapped up in a flag. Sport may be turning globalised, but unless the fan feels a psychological commitment, they are unlikely to want to pay for it.

And before anyone accuses me of being an out-of-touch Premier League fan, the last time I paid to watch a match was to see my local team dumped out of the FA Cup in front of 500 fans. I'd have traded anything England could do against Kazakhstan for a different result.

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