

Television Series Review

Sunderland 'Til I Die

Executive Producers: Leo Pearlman and Ben Turner

Production Company: Fulwell 73

Release date: 14 December 2018

Network: Netflix

Website: www.fulwell73.com/sunderland-til-i-die

Review DOI

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Starting with *The Last Dance*, the 2020 Netflix miniseries featuring arguably the greatest basketballer of all time, Michael Jordan, there has been a slew of sports documentaries available to viewers looking to pass the time in these COVID-19-constrained times. These “fly on the wall” documentaries provide a fascinating insight into the behind the scenes life of sportspeople and their teams. One absorbing series, *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, follows the travails of English football club, Sunderland Association Football Club (AFC). While it might be commonplace for a series to trace the successful performances, the *Sunderland 'Til I Die* series is captivating because it begins with Sunderland AFC playing in the Championship in the 2017–2018 season, the second division of English professional football, having been relegated from the top division, in the previous year. Series 1 follows the team as they have high hopes of returning to the Premier League division. Spoiler alert: they finish bottom of the championship and are relegated again to play in division 1, the third division of English professional football, for the 2018–2019 season, which is where series 2 of the docuseries starts. Like the proverbial train wreck, the club lurches from one problem to the next (poor on-field performance, injured players, players leaving the club, firing of the manager, financial

difficulties, angry and disenfranchised fans, losing a Cup Final at Wembley [. . .]) but you just cannot look away.

But beyond the actual performance of the team, *Sunderland 'Til I Die* sheds insight into various aspects of society. In a postmodern post-Christian society (Curtice *et al.*, 2019), football for many in Sunderland has become their religion or at least is intermeshed with formal religion. While Karl Marx commented that religion is opium for the masses, Argentinian football great, Diego Maradona, stated football is not a game or a sport, it is a religion.

In Sunderland, the football team, community and religion are intertwined and inseparable. This is exemplified most clearly in the first (Series 1, Episode 1) and last episodes (Series 2, Episode 6) where the documentary shows church services where the priest would be praying for the team, intimating that, as with Jesus' resurrection so too could Sunderland AFC resurrect both the spirits of the community and fortunes of the football team (compare with Taylor and Taylor, 1997).

Coming from a working-class city, such as Sunderland, the football team, supporting your team and attending matches is an escapism from the drudgery and mundane. Those 90 min of football can transport fans emotionally away, from the hardships of life. As a season ticket holder, Peter Farrar stated in Series 1, Episode 1: “Sunderland was the biggest shipbuilding town in the world. We did massive employment in Sunderland in the 60s, 50s, 40s, 30s with the shipyards and the pits. . . unfortunately those jobs have gone. [. . .] It is a hard place. Sunderland is a massive, massive footballing city. This is the

lifeline [...] We're talking about a working-class city, where the main talking point is Sunderland Football Club... Sunderland Football Club is Sunderland [...] We have n't got much going for us to start with. [Referring to the relegation from the Premiership] It's just another nail in the coffin. Like the shipyards and the pits."

In the context of post-industrial hardships, sharing an experience with others in your community by supporting your team can reinforce a sense of community, creating a "tribe" that shares these sacred experiences (Fulconis and Pache, 2014). Being a diehard football fan of a particular club, such as Sunderland, creates a sense of identity (Porat, 2010). Football fandom is a way of life. It creates an "us" versus "them" played out of the pitch but lived through identification with the team. This is epitomised in the chant, *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, the basis of the docuseries title.

The tribalism creates and reinforces an "us" and "them" mentality – an insider and outsider dichotomy. As an insider, fans share the successes and (more often) failures with the team and by extension, other Sunderland fans. Tribalism is reinforced through the sacrifices made in terms of both time and money, the income spent on being a season ticket holder and purchasing the latest football kit as well as the time spent attending the games, even travelling hundreds of miles to attend away matches.

Does the series provide any implications for sport and event tourism? Or the future of tourism more generally?

In terms of implications for sports or event tourism, my personal opinion is that there are few avenues for growth. Admittedly every weekend, football fans are traversing the country to support their team. In this sense, food and beverage places, and particularly pubs, are populated with visiting fans. Overnight stays in accommodation

places might happen but are limited, given the clubs arrange supporters' buses to travel to the matches, there and back, on game day. I sense these away fans might not extend their stay and visit other attractions in the hosting city or town.

Given the strong alliances British fans have with their own team, it would be unlikely domestic tourists will watch two neutral teams. And they would definitely not go and watch any other team in their geographic area. Manchester City fans hate Manchester United fans and vice versa. The same goes for Liverpool and Everton fans. In the northeast of England, Newcastle United, Middlesbrough FC and Sunderland AFC fans have a deep resentment for each other.

For international tourists, and sports enthusiasts and especially football fans, attending an English football match would be an exciting experience. The passion of the fans, the chanting and singing add to the excitement. Feeling the emotions together with the fans, the highs of scoring a goal, the lows of conceding a goal and the travesty of having a player given a yellow or red card, would be a unique experience. One warning to parents taking their children to see a match is that sitting amongst these passionate fans may not be family-friendly entertainment as fans are not shy to let the referees, opposition and even own team know, in no uncertain terms, how they feel about them when decisions or their performance does not meet expectations. As seen in the documentary, there is a lot of cussing and swearing.

Given that English football has become an international spectacle, followed by millions around the world, globalisation of the world game will drive tourists to experience firsthand, a game of football. Sporting documentaries, such as *Sunderland 'Til I Die* and others on Netflix such as *First Team: Juventus* (2018) and *All or*

Nothing: Manchester City (2018) help create this demand for international tourists to witness a football match when on vacation.

Running time: 37–42 min.

Network: Netflix.

Release date: 14 December 2018.

No. of series and episodes: Series 1, 8 Episodes; Series 2, 6 Episodes.

Executive Producers: Leo Pearlman and Ben Turner.

Directors:

Myles Judd (8 episodes, 2018);

Jonna McIver (8 episodes, 2018);

David Soutar (8 episodes, 2018);

Charles Kinross (3 episodes, 2018);

Itamar Klasmer (3 episodes, 2018);

Tom Mallion (2 episodes, 2018);

Adam Donneky (1 episode, 2018);

Alex Oldham (1 episode, 2018);

Andrew Parkin (1 episode, 2018); and

Production company: Fulwell 73.

Website – www.fulwell73.com/sunderland-til-i-die.

References

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Corresponding author

Stephen Pratt can be contacted at: stephen.pratt@usp.ac.fj

Stephen Pratt

Stephen Pratt is based at the School of Business and Management, The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji