

Introduction

THE ENGLISH ARE BACK

It is the summer of 2009. A sweltering day in Singapore. Crowds have gathered in the city state to welcome a football team. But this is not a local team. This is a team from Singapore's former colonial masters Britain: Liverpool.

The 2009-10 Premier League season is about to start. Liverpool are on their pre-season tour and the crowds thronging the Padang, a former cricket ground, and other venues in the city look as if they are welcoming a team of conquering heroes. At one stage during the ceremonial parade the players take a ride on a boat. Crowds lean over bridges and on either side of Marina Bay, Boat Quay and Clarke Quay to shout out the names of their favourite players. Very few of the squad are from Liverpool, indeed not many are even qualified to play for England, representing as they do many other nations from around the world. What this picture reveals, as these players are mobbed by a largely Asian crowd of Chinese origin, is the appeal of modern international sport and its ability to bring people together.

What makes the delirium of this welcome extraordinary is that Liverpool have not come to Singapore as champions of England, let alone Europe. Their past glories are receding into history as they are going through a barren spell, having won no trophies the previous season. The people gathered on every available balcony and vantage point have never been to England, let alone Liverpool. But they know everything about the team, the songs, the chants of their supporters, their history. And like all true Liverpool fans they hate Manchester United with a passion, they even sing anti-United songs, although that is another city that remains forever foreign to them.

The crowd here includes Muslim women. As I mingle among them they tell me of their love for Liverpool and how they identify with the players. But once they notice I have a cameraman in tow they suddenly become reluctant to talk, lest their parents find out. Off camera, however, they are more than happy to reveal their intimate knowledge of the club from Anfield.

As you walk around Singapore, it is soon evident that for the people of this island this love extends beyond Liverpool to all of English football. Almost all the major clubs have their followers. Indeed there is almost an obsession with the Premier League. Some have even changed their sleeping habits on match days just to be able to watch the games live on television. Singapore is eight hours ahead of the UK, so on Premier League match days

people go to bed around 7pm and get up around 4 am to follow the evening match being broadcast live from England.

Mayur Bhanji, football producer for World Sports Group, who grew up in Leicester and now lives in Singapore, reflects:

Liverpool has one of the biggest fan bases with two clubs. It is a very tribal following. The Singapore fans of Liverpool passionately hate Manchester United and vice versa. For big matches like Carling Cup finals a thousand of them will gather and watch it on giant screens. For big tournaments people will even change their working habits to take in the coverage from Europe. So for Euro 2012 people are going to start working at five in the evening, finishing well past midnight so that they can take in the 7.45 pm kick-off at the Euros. All the major English clubs have targeted these fans and Chelsea have been particularly active trying to target disillusioned fans of other clubs who are not doing so well. These fans follow success and do switch loyalties.

Now take a three-hour flight west to Kolkata and come into the city centre by metro.

Kolkata, if not quite Kipling's "packed and pestilential town," is as dirty, smog-ridden and clogged with traffic as ever. Although built by the British Raj, and once the capital of British India and the second city of the Empire, those imperial days have long gone. The city venerates those who fought the Raj for India's freedom. Opposite the memorial left behind by the British to honour the dead of two world wars is a statue of a man who in his desire to see a free India allied himself with the Germans and Japanese during the Second World War.

The city is part of a state that for more than 30 years from 1977 to 2012 was ruled by hardline Indian communists. It is a city where strikes can shut the whole city down for days, an activity the locals call bandh. It means "stop" and it literally stops everything in the city. Every political demonstration involves liberal displays of the red flag.

But the metro station is an oasis in this city of decay, filth and turbulence. For a start it is spotlessly clean. What is more, it also advertises England's Premier League. The video screens on the platforms are showing the matches played the previous night. As the crowds gather to wait for the next train they look up at the screens and exchange knowledgeable gossip about the two English teams locked in passionate combat. Some of them are supporters of the teams, and a few even wear T-shirts of Premier

League teams. As passengers leave the metro, vendors with merchandise of various English clubs approach them hoping to strike a deal.

The Premier League is well aware of its global reach. At grounds like Stamford Bridge or the Emirates advertisements, signs and messages from Korea, Japan and Singapore are common. Towards the end of the 2011-12 season as Arsenal and Manchester City warmed up on the Emirates pitch, both sets of players wore T-shirts advertising a match that the two teams would play in Beijing Bird's Nest stadium on the opening day of the Olympics Games in London. It was meant to demonstrate that while the Olympics might be coming to the British capital for a record third time, English football was going global.

The Indian Premier League, the richest tournament in cricket, was modelled on the English Premier League. And in the summer of 2011 flat racing, keen to arrest its decline, concluded after extensive research that it needed to model its season on the Premier League, including a Champions racing day like the final day of the Premier League season. Nic Coward, then chief executive of the British Horseracing Authority, now back with the Premier League, explained to me why racing wanted to adopt the winning Premier League formula:

What the Premier League did was to focus on quality, promote the game very hard, and lift the whole profile of football. The new racing championship will mean taking the crown jewels of our season across the key distances and saying to consumers: these are the races you really need to care about.

Such is the appeal of the Premier League that politicians recognise it and are keen to use it for their own political ends. This was to become very evident when, soon after becoming Prime Minister, David Cameron decided to visit India. Cameron was keen to forge a new relationship with Britain's old colony. He led one of the largest such delegations to accompany a British leader abroad, including as it did Chancellor George Osborne and almost a third of the Cabinet. The team were carefully selected to develop the right business relationship with Asia's emerging power. Of course, the team included several businessmen. But among the 60-strong delegation on the plane with Cameron was Richard Scudamore, chief executive of the Premier League.

A few months later when Jo Johnson, a Conservative MP, and Rajiv Kumar, secretary general of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, edited a book called *Reconnecting Britain and India* they included a chapter by Scudamore. It was entitled: Can 1.3 billion Indians learn to love football? The opportunities for expanding the Premier League in India.

Scudamore wrote:

We now count India as one of the Premier League's key overseas markets. Our relationship with the broadcaster ESPN Star Sports means Indians have had the opportunity to watch Barclays Premier League matches for over a decade, with five matches shown live every weekend. Viewing figures are difficult to break down by territory, but suffice it to say that there are record numbers watching in India, and this has been reflected in the growing value of broadcast rights in the region . . . ESPN Star started broadcasting live Premier League football in the late 1990s. It has now been six years since it began providing a specific Hindi commentary feed for all Barclays Premier League games.

In October 2010 we saw the first Indian-owned company, Venky's, to take a controlling stake in one of our clubs, Blackburn Rovers. This season, we have had Absolute Radio, the station owned by the Times of India Group, become one of our radio rights holders in the UK. Late in 2011, we plan on India being one of the destinations for the Barclays Premier League Trophy tour, an exciting new development which will give the Indian public the opportunity to visit, for free, a state-of-the-art fully interactive visitor centre, showcasing the league, its clubs and players, as it tours the globe over the coming three years.

Our clubs have also sought to enhance their links with India in a number of ways. Some have specific commercial partnership with Indian companies, others have opened up popular bars and cafes, and many are running regular football training camps across the country . . . For the past four years, India has been one of the countries we have focused on in our lead international development project, 'Premier Skills.' Premier Skills is a collaboration between the Premier League and the British Council: it sees coaches from Premier League clubs, with real expertise in using football to tackle wider social issues, help to develop community football coaches all over the world. We have run Premier Skills in four Indian locations: New Delhi, Kolkata, Goa and Kerala, training close to 200 new male and female coaches. These coaches may be school PE teachers, run amateur football sides, or work with local charities.

Then, after listing all the other things that were happening, Scudamore concluded: "Our links with India are growing fast: this is just the start of a beautiful friendship." And as with Singapore, this love for Premier League football did not suggest that India itself was a football giant. Far from it.

The country have only once qualified for a World Cup finals, back in 1950, and then failed to make it to Brazil because FIFA, the world body, would not allow their players to play in bare feet – that being the custom in Indian football. Since then India's decline in the international game has been such that they have struggled to compete even in Asia, a continent they once dominated. There could be no better proof of the appeal of the Premier League.

The same goes for the purchase of Blackburn by Venky's in November 2010. Blackburn Rovers were one of the founding clubs of the old Football League in 1888, when the town was at the heart of the Lancashire cotton kingdom that ruled the world. Those days of glory have long gone. Ironically, it was another, rather more famous Indian, Mahatma Gandhi, who played a part in king cotton's demise and ensured Blackburn's decline. The British conquest of India had ended India's pre-industrial dominance and made of it a supplier of cheap goods, such as cotton, to British manufacturers. These finished goods were then exported back to India, further enriching Britain. Gandhi, in his drive to free India from British rule, tried to convince Indians that they should not use cloth made in Lancashire towns such as Blackburn, but use home-spun cotton instead. That would both hurt Britain and demonstrate to his fellow Indians they had something of their own to cherish rather than always worshipping everything their English masters produced.

Back in the 1930s on a visit to England Gandhi had even visited Lancashire towns explaining why his campaign against Lancashire cotton was necessary to free India. If Gandhi was still alive he would have been astounded that nearly a century later a modern generation of Indians had returned to the same part of the world to buy a football club.

It was clear that Blackburn had been presented to the Rao family, who own Venky's, as an English brand they could rescue and profit from. Blackburn would have been sold to them as the club that won the Premiership in 1995, one of only five clubs to win the Premiership since its inception. What would have made the sale even more attractive is that the club would have been seen as tremendously undervalued. Its total enterprise value was £45m, including around £20m of debt, half of what Real Madrid paid Manchester United for Cristiano Ronaldo and not much more than a few years wages for Wayne Rooney. Nothing attracts a businessman to a deal then the feeling he is getting a jewel rather cheap. And a club that shares glory that only Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea have managed in 20 years is surely a jewel? The fact that there is a large Asian population round in Blackburn which could be tapped into was also a factor.

The Venky's subsequent handling of Blackburn has not won them much credit, indeed they were the butt of jokes at the first Asian Football Dinner at Wembley early in 2012, and the club are a long way from the giddy heights they reached in 1995. After the 2011-12 season saw the club relegated there was intense anger expressed by fans of the Venky's management or lack of it. The Premier League's defence was they could hardly be expected to account for individual management styles. As Scudamore put it:

"We don't sit here regretting that the owners have actually bought the club. What you do regret - for the sake of Blackburn and their fans - is that the performances of the team have led to them being relegated."

The Premier League chief admitted that he sympathises with supporters' discontent but does not think that the rules should have blocked the takeover. Scudamore added: "I can understand why they will feel aggrieved because they've got a situation where other people owning that club, and managing that club, weren't making the decisions that the fans themselves would have made.

But their acquisition of the Lancashire club did make the Raos famous in India.

It was clear the Raos saw their purchase as promoting them into the premier league of India's rich. Apart from their Venky's poultry business, they also have extensive property holdings, but they are far from the top 10 richest Indian families. This made their purchase of Blackburn all the more interesting. Before the Raos bought Blackburn, other super-rich Indian families were linked with a purchase of a Premier League club, particularly the Ambanis, who are at the very top of the rich list. But while the Amban- is looked at several clubs, including Liverpool, they did not open their cheque book. The Raos clearly decided they needed a Premier League club seeing it as a great status symbol. They would only have to turn on their television sets in India to discover the Premier League's status as football's greatest brand. The 24-hour news ticker at the bottom of their screens would include scores of Premier League matches. Indians probably watch more live Premier League matches, including the 3 pm Saturday kick-offs, than most do in Britain.

Not that English football's appeal is a recent phenomenon. Tony Fernandes who bought QPR during the 2011-12 season has a vivid memory of how he fell in love with West Ham:

Growing up in Malaysia we used to get these matches, after about three

months. The programme was called Star Soccer, a Central TV production. Generally they showed matches between Stoke, Wolverhampton Wanderers and Birmingham, it was awful football. The pictures were really muddy and it was all long ball. And one day I saw this team playing Wolves, West Ham. They played from the back, and they played really attractive football and I was like 'Wow!', and that was it. I said 'I'm going to support West Ham. I started listening to Paddy Feeny on the BBC World Service.

But in those days news of English football was limited to the written media, the broad-casts of the BBC World Service and the odd televised game. The Premier League's rise is in a different dimension. Television and the internet make its impact instant. It demonstrates that in many parts of the world where the Union Flag was long ago lowered, where British troops and administrators have long since departed, the power of England still shines. This is a power not of the gun or even of British commerce, but of modern English football. The political empire has gone, the football empire lives on.

You could say it illustrates what Sir Richard Turnbull, the penultimate Governor of Aden, told the former Labour Chancellor Denis Healey: 'When the British Empire finally sank beneath the waves of history, it left behind it only two monuments – one was the game of Association Football, the other was the expression "Fuck off."

Turnbull said this in the 1960s when nobody had even conceived of the idea of the Premier League. Now, as the Labour MP Tristram Hunt has put it, the Premier League is one of the best British exports. Few could have anticipated its impact when the Premier League was launched. At one level its rise can be seen as a continuation of the familiar story of the British inventing most of the sports the world plays, or at least codifying their rules and regulations. It once again illustrates the ability of the British to invent products and brands whose appeal extends far beyond their borders.

When the Premier League was founded in 1992, La Liga in Spain and Serie A in Italy were the dominant European leagues, secure in their own homelands and in the wider world. Italian football had even invaded England's football scene, being broadcast every Sunday afternoon on Channel 4. But in the last 20 years all that has changed. Premier League teams may not always match the skills of the top teams in La Liga or Serie A but its dominance as a global force cannot be denied. It is the league that millions around the world want to watch every week.

Its rise has been helped by wider forces in football and society. The

Premier League benefited from the fact that the British government has always given football clubs a great deal of freedom to operate as they please. The sort of freedom that would be anathema to the Americans, for all their proclaimed love of the free market, and that is even considered unacceptable in most other European countries. But it was also helped by the changes to the European club competitions, which coincided with its launch. And a further spur was the decision by the European Court of Justice in 1995 to back an obscure Belgian player, Jean-Marc Bosman, in his fight for freedom of movement. This revolutionised the European transfer market and came at a crucial stage in the development of the Premier League.

But the real fascination of the Premier League is that it emerged at a time when the English game was at a very low ebb. Indeed, only a few years before its foundation it had seemed that the game might not even survive in its own homeland. For two desperate decades in the 1970s and 1980s English football was racked by hooliganism, racism and a feeling in the English establishment, as one influential newspaper put it, that this was a slum game which had long outlived its usefulness. English football was also physically dangerous and had witnessed many deaths at football matches. It was against this dismal background that the Premier League was launched in a very British, indeed English, way where the idea of global reach was not a factor or even much discussed. The initial idea was driven by a few clubs trying to make a bit more money from television. But, just as the old East India Company – given the exclusive license to trade in India by Elizabeth I in the hope it would make money for her beleaguered kingdom – went on to secure a great empire, so the Premier League, almost despite its antecedents, was to become the most powerful league in the world.

With the Premier League having completed 20 years, this is an opportune moment to look back at its remarkable rise. The league has been celebrating its 20th birthday with a plethora of special awards and its website has highlighted the journey from childhood to an all-powerful adult. As you would expect from any such official celebration, there is careful editing. So much is made of Eric Cantona, but no mention of his infamous kung-fu kick. And while a photo gallery of 20 years shows many dramatic moments, including former Liverpool goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar in action, there is no mention of the match-fixing scandals and controversies resulting in high-profile court cases that have also marked the last 20 years. But in fairness the league can point to the fact that for all the dark moments there has been much to celebrate.

The inaugural season in 1992-93, with 22 teams in the Premier League, later reduced to 20, did not always play to full houses. That season the Premier League grounds were only 69.6 per cent full, the season's aggregate attendance was 9.75 million and the Premier League's total income was £46 million. The 20th season saw 13.4 million fans attend the matches with average stadium occupancy in excess of 92% for the third season in a row. For fifteen years Premier League stadia has been more than 90% full.

During the 2010/11 season Premier League clubs' combined revenue had risen by 12% to £2.3 billion quite dwarfing their European rivals. Income levels in both Spain and Germany were at £1.6 bn, Italy at £1.4bn and France at £0.9bn. As they made money the clubs invested having spent £99 million in stadia and facilities during 2010/11 which meant total investment in facilities over the last 20 seasons has been more than £2 billion. The tax man was also kept happy. Of the British government's tax intake from the 92 professional clubs of £1.2 billion, the Premier League contributed approximately £1 billion. And this was a socially aware League with 4.5 million beneficiaries of the Premier League's Creating Chances programmes during 2011. This, boasted the League, reached out to "the heart of the communities in which the clubs operate, working across the areas of Community Cohesion, Education, Health, Sports Participation and International." The league also worked with local police force and encouraged participation in eight Olympic sports. Indeed its distribution of more than £165m outside the League in solidarity payments, good causes and grassroots funding was three and a half times the total earnings of the league back in 1992-93.

The Premier League bosses must have felt they were in dream land as the 20th season ended. No Hollywood, or even Bollywood script writer could have scripted the finish better. Not only did the drama last almost to the last kick of the season with two teams separated by goal difference, no result could be closer, but it produced a new winner for the Premier League. And to provide the icing on the cake the winner was a club that had not won it for 44 years and whose rise meant that the dominance of Manchester United was threatened by a neighbour from across the City rather than from other cities.

The match was compared to the one in 1989. Then Arsenal, required to win 2-0 at Liverpool, scored with almost the last kick of the match to win the title. But that was one match. The rest of the League season was long over. It was also an evening match which was televised only in Britain. Then there was television coverage to a few Scandinavian countries but only of Saturday afternoon matches. The Manchester City v QPR match was part of a final day when all ten matches were played at the same time with a 3

pm start. Such a traditional start never happens during the rest of the season but this was a finely choreographed television event with the coverage extended to 212 territories, reaching 650m households with an estimated cumulative global audience of 4.7 billion. And that final day made history with all the matches broadcast live in the US, Fox broadcast nine of the matches and ESPN US one - Manchester City v QPR.

In the lead up to the Sunday climax City's Ivory Coast midfielder Yaya Toure, whose two goals at Newcastle in the penultimate match meant victory in the final match at home to QPR would give them the title, had stoked up the fires by declaring, "I wanted to come to the club to make a story and my decision was to come to City. Of course, some people make some speculation about other things, but, for me, when you are a football player, you always want to go where you can be loved and be the best player. At Barcelona, I was a good player [where he won the 2009 Champions League with Barca] but at City I am an important player for the team."

Toure also revealed some dressing room secrets. Publicly after the defeat at Arsenal on April 8, which had put United eight points ahead of City, the manager Roberto Mancini had publicly conceded the title. But privately behind closed doors he told the players they could still emerge triumphant. According to Toure Mancini said, "Guys we don't have to give up, you know, because the Premier League is like that and maybe United can drop some points and we can come back. We have to believe to the end because we're in the most competitive competition in the world and most importantly we have to keep going, keep winning and maybe we'll be close to them."

This suggested that Mancini was not quite the simpleton many of his critics had made him out to be when City had wobbled in the run-in. The day following the dramatic events at the Etihad stadium 100,000 people crammed the streets of Manchester and with the wealth of Abu Dhabi backing their club they were confident that while Manchester United had seen off other rivals over the years, including Chelsea backed by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, City could now chalk out a dynasty as long and as enduring as the one Sir Alex Ferguson had created at United.

This story of success led David Richards, the chairman of the Premier League, to boast:

I always had a vision of the Premier League from being there right from the word go in 1989. When we talked about the Premier League we wanted a super, super league. I wanted to make football the best in the

world. It is what drives you. The best clubs, the best players, I wanted the best league. I wanted the best people playing in the league and working in the league.

However, like the editing out of Cantona's kung-fu incident, this is a bit like the man who, having reached the top of Everest, decides to ignore the many problems he encountered on the way to the summit. Back in 1989, not many people were expounding the vision that Richards claims he had then. And if they did entertain such hopes, they kept very quiet about it. The reason for that was that when those responsible for the formation of the league began their planning, English football was a wreck that looked incapable of renewal, let alone world dominance. Many had written it off as a lost cause. Let us now revisit that bleak landscape to appreciate the path the Premier League had to tread to get to its current place in the sun.