



# IS IT JUST ME OR IS MODERN FOOTBALL S\*\*T?

*An Encyclopaedia of Everything  
That is Wrong in the Modern Game*



**Jim Keoghan**

**IS IT JUST ME OR IS  
MODERN FOOTBALL  
S\*\*T?**

*An Encyclopaedia of Everything  
That is Wrong in the Modern Game*

**Jim Keohan**



# Chapters

Acknowledgements	11
Introduction	12
A – <b>A4</b> Protests, <b>Advertising</b> Hoardings, Football <b>Agents</b> , <b>Armchair</b> Scouts, <b>Autobiographies</b>	15
B – <b>B</b> Teams, <b>Balls</b> , <b>Betting</b> Sponsors, A <b>Bigger</b> , <b>Better</b> World Cup, <b>Boots</b>	25
C – <b>Celebrity</b> Referees, The <b>Champions</b> League, The <b>Checkatrade</b> Trophy, <b>Corporate</b> Partners, <b>Cultivated</b> Atmosphere	35
D – Edgar <b>Dauids’</b> Uncontrollable Ego, <b>Deadline</b> Day, <b>Diving</b> , <b>Dodgy</b> Handballs, Adrian <b>Durham</b>	45
E – <b>Endorsements</b> , <b>Eng-ger-land</b> Mania, The <b>England</b> Band, <b>English</b> Jobs for <b>English</b> Managers, The <b>European</b> Super League	55
F – The <b>FA</b> , <b>Fan</b> TV, <b>Fantasy</b> Football, <b>FIFA</b> 21, <b>Formations</b>	66
G – Gareth Southgate – <b>England</b> Manager, <b>Glory</b> Hunters, <b>Goal</b> Music, <b>Goals</b> , <b>Goals GOALS!!!!</b> , <b>Going</b> Topless	76
H – <b>Half</b> Scarves, <b>Heat</b> Maps, <b>Hipsters</b> , <b>Hoolie</b> Lit, <b>Hyperbole</b>	86

I – <b>I ♥ Panenka</b> , <b>The Idiot Box</b> , <b>Injury Porn</b> , <b>Inked Up</b> , <b>Itchy Trigger Fingers</b>	95
J – <b>Jamie Carragher</b> , <b>Jamie Redknapp</b> , <b>John Sitton’s Managerial Masterclass</b> , <b>Jostling for a Move</b> , <b>Judge and Jury</b>	105
K – <b>A Very Roy Keane Christmas</b> , <b>Richard Keys</b> , <b>If in Doubt</b> , <b>Kick Him Out</b> , <b>Kissing the Badge</b> , <b>Kits</b>	115
L – <b>Laps of Dishonour</b> , <b>Like I Said ... Living My Best Football Life!</b> , <b>Look What He Did!</b> , <b>Losing the Right Way</b>	123
M – <b>Steve McManaman</b> , <b>The ‘Magic’ of the Cup</b> , <b>Mascots</b> , <b>Mensworld</b> , <b>Modern Stadiums</b>	133
N – <b>Nations League</b> , <b>Net Spend</b> , <b>New FIFA</b> , <b>Neymar</b> , <b>Non-Celebrations</b>	143
O – <b>Original Celebrations</b> , <b>My Other Team is ... Outraged by Shorts</b> , <b>Outrageous Ticket Prices</b> , <b>Michael Owen</b>	153
P – <b>Parachute Payments</b> , <b>Phil Neville – England Manager</b> , <b>Pitches</b> , <b>Plucky Little ... Poppies</b>	162
Q – <b>Qatar 2022</b> , <b>QPR Ritual Goblets</b> , <b>Quarterbacks</b>	171
R – <b>‘I’m No More Racist than the Next Bloke But ...’</b> , <b>Rallying Cries</b> , <b>Rebranding</b> , <b>Rewarding Failure</b> , <b>Outside Right</b>	176
S – <b>Slogans</b> , <b>Soccer AM</b> , <b>Stadium Naming Rights</b> , <b>Steve Claridge’s Sexual Magnetism</b> , <b>Streaming Misery</b>	186

T – Tekkers, Tim Sherwood, Time Wasting Transfer Gossip, Twitter	195
U – Gordon Strachan’s Unified Theory of Selective Breeding, Unnecessarily Inconvenient Kick-Off Times, Unscrupulous Owners	206
V – VAR, Very Pleased to Meet You, The EVil Summer	217
W – We Want Our Game Back, Wembley, A Cold, Wet Tuesday Night in Stoke, Wimbledon FC’s Misadventures in Modern Football, The Club World Cup	223
X – X Factor, EXiting Early, EXtremist Lads	233
Y – You Only Sing When You’re Organised in a Club-Sanctioned Singing Section, You Spin Me Right Round, You’ll Never Believe ...	239
Z – Zealotry, Year Zero, Zillionaires, Zlatan, Pundit Zoo	245
Epilogue	254



## **4 Protests**

Picture yourself as the owner of a Premier League football club. You can choose what kind; sleazy Russian oligarch, reputation-washing Middle Eastern sheik or an asset-sweating, dead-eyed American automaton.

Now also imagine that the club is going through a rocky patch and there are rumblings that the crowd is turning against you. In your darkest moments, you picture in your mind something akin to the storming of the Winter Palace at the next home game, vast swathes of the great unwashed crashing against the directors' box.

Imagine your relief then when you take your seat to find that these 'rumblings' have merely amounted to a few fans holding up dog-eared pieces of A4 paper, upon which messages of protest have been hastily scribbled. Sipping on your expensive cognac, your feet resting upon the back of a crouching steward, you bathe in relief, letting your mind

shift to more pleasurable considerations, such as which artisan cheese you'll opt for at half-time.

The construction of these signs represents a rare example in the game of deliberate, premeditated s\*\*tiness. Not for them the organised mass protest or the sophisticated online campaign. Not even the slickly produced banner. This is the 'f\*\*k it' approach – minimal input for minimal impact.

And frequently you wonder whether they've even read the sign back. Multiple fonts and capital letters in the wrong place, they sometimes look more like the kind of letter a serial killer might send to the police to taunt them about their lack of progress in the ongoing manhunt.

Can it work? Will any owner ever stare down into the crowd, see this 'protest' and the look of solemnity the protestor usually wears when holding the sign aloft and think, 'You know what? I was going to treat this club as my personal plaything and possibly ruin it in the process. But after reading that, I think it's about time I changed my ways.'?

In an infinite universe filled with infinite possibilities, it could happen. But I think it's asking a lot of those signs. Far more likely instead that the sleazy chairmen of football's grim future will get to enjoy their artisan cheese in peace.



## Advertising Hoardings

Back in December 2017, one-time wunderkind and current Lille midfielder, Renato Sanches, then playing for Swansea City, made headlines when he mistakenly passed the ball to an advertising hoarding during a game against Chelsea.

The on-loan Bayern Munich man (he gets around) had collected the ball in the centre circle, looked up, and passed off to his left. Only there was no team-mate there to receive. To the disgust of his fellow players and the crowd, the ball rolled out of play, hitting a hoarding displaying the Carabao logo.

Sanches later said that he had confused the logo for one of his team-mates, which was a worrying claim considering it featured the white skull of a carabao. Unless he was under the misapprehension that Peter Crouch had recently signed for the club, it's difficult to understand who Sanches had in mind when he did this.

Although widely mocked for his mistake, it's hard not to feel some sympathy for the young midfielder. Back in the pre-digital age, advertising hoardings were simple things. No flashing lights or moving images, they were constant and sedate, advertising straightforward, local things, such as processed meat and scaffolding.

In the modern game, thanks to the arrival of LED lights, they now represent an ocular assault. Always changing, brightly lit, sometimes containing a moving image, these new hoardings are a constant distraction. Not only is it easy to see why Sanches was momentarily confused, it's surprising it doesn't happen more often.

The lead offender in this distracting trend is unquestionably Stanley the Dachshund. You probably know 'Stanley' by his other, more commonly used names, which include: 'Is that a dog on the pitch?' 'There's that dog again', and 'Why is that f\*\*king dog still there?' He was created to advertise Vitality insurance, who somehow

thought that pissing off as many football fans as possible would be a good way to rustle up some business.

Despite the advancement in technology, it's debatable whether Stanley and his ilk are even necessary anyway. For years, the printed hoardings of the past worked their subliminal magic. Ever had a craving for a Mars bar as you're viewing a game on TV? An inexplicable desire for scaffolding while at the match? A sudden, visceral memory of Peter Crouch while watching the League Cup?

But they can't leave things alone, always trying to find new ways to make us buy more stuff. And who is the ultimate victim in all of this? Who suffers the most? Well, it's poor little Renato, a man who will forever be known as the first footballer in history to try to play a through pass to a carabao, a mantle that will haunt him wherever he goes for years to come.

## Football gents

Agent is a strange word. When you add it to others, it has the unique knack of making the combination instantly more unpleasant. Take the word 'estate', innocuous enough. Now add the word 'agent' and feel your skin begin to crawl.

The same is true of 'orange', entirely harmless on its own. Now stick 'agent' in front of it and suddenly you have the health-wrecking herbicide used by the US Army during the Vietnam War, one that spread devastation and misery wherever it was sprayed.

Another kind of agent that spreads devastation and misery wherever they're sprayed are football agents.

They started out, about a generation ago, as innocent representation for players, helping protect the best interests of individuals whose skill set was better equipped for chasing a ball around a pitch than sitting around a negotiating table, sifting through the finer points of contractual law.

The first agent to really break through into the popular consciousness was Eric Hall, who in his 90s pomp represented the likes of Dennis Wise, Neil Ruddock and Tim Sherwood. He was a larger-than-life personality who seemed to apply a level of discernment to his client base, very much rooted in the ‘arsehole’ category.

But for all his surface slipperiness, with his limited domestic reach, he seems a bit quaint from today’s vantage point. Nowadays, there’s so much more to the agent game, particularly as a small group of so-called ‘super agents’ effectively run the whole transfer market, pulling it in the direction they choose. These people can build entire teams; they can also pull them apart. They can make clubs pay way more than they would want to. And you’re taking a huge gamble if you decide to cross them.

Agents like Mino Raiola, representative of Paul Pogba, Zlatan Ibrahimović and Erling Haaland. Once described by Alex Ferguson as a ‘s\*\*t bag’, Raiola has come a long way since his early days of delivering pizza for his parents’ restaurant in the Netherlands. Although even back then the seeds of his future career were apparent, with Raiola eating a 10 per cent cut from every pizza delivered and frequently briefing the local press about the pizza’s desire to be delivered to a different house.

Raiola and co. excel at exploiting the 24-hour news machine, feeding it rumours and half-hearted denials. They keep the transfer gossip columns churning all year round, seeding hints and false hope, toying with our emotions, all with the aim of improving their leveraging position.

They might not be as clean and creepy as estate agents or quite as capable of deforestation as Agent Orange, but the power and influence of these agents is still one of modern football's more depressing developments. Somehow, the people who make the deals have become almost as important as the players they represent.

## **Armchair Scouts**

Beyond the big names and those you saw on a regular basis, there used to be a sense of ignorance about a lot of footballers. In the analogue days of the past, so little was known about many players that often, when a signing was mooted, they were a bit of an unknown quantity.

That was particularly the case with those from beyond our shores. The international scene was like a footballing black hole, an information void from which foreign players would emerge, with their exquisitely coiffured mullets, their outlandish fashion sense and their bewilderment at the English footballer's contention that midweek benders represented a legitimate addition to any sensible training schedule.

And underlining it all, a lingering sense of deference towards clubs, a belief that they might know more about recruitment than us fans. Scouting was shrouded in mystery, a world of gut feelings and crafty bines.

But not anymore. Nowadays, everybody is a f\*\*king expert.

When Real Madrid signed proto-starlet, Martin Ødegaard from the backwoods of Norwegian football in 2015, within hours of the deal being announced a tsunami of articles about his potential poured forth from the keyboards of football's modern army of armchair scouts.

They trawl the stats and watch the clips, knocking out opinion pieces with a veneer of quasi-scientific inquiry.

But can you really just set yourself up as an expert without the training or years of experience? Can I just decide tomorrow to become a surgeon because I've sat through a season of *Holby City*? Or become a police detective after watching old episodes of *Columbo*? Sure, I can wear a dirty mac and smoke a cigar, but can I really ingratiate myself into Martin Landau's confidence and then use his own sense of overconfidence against him to reveal to the world that he killed his wife?

I know we're meant to live in an age where information has been democratised and the public enjoy a Govean dislike of 'experts', but might it still be the case that the people who scout for a living, those hardy souls who have spent their lifetimes watching game after game, player after player, all in the hope of unearthing a gem, might know more than the blogger who spent five minutes watching a YouTube highlights reel?

And maybe in a game as predictable as modern football often is, it also just makes a nice change to be surprised for once. To have the opportunity, without prejudice, to witness a Per Krøldrup defensive masterclass or to savour

the goalscoring impotence of Vincent Janssen, free from preconceptions. To luxuriate in the ineptitude of Jan Kromkamp, without prior knowledge.

Sometimes, blissful ignorance is best.

## **Autobiographies**

Part of the problem with many modern football autobiographies is the fact that most of the players in question haven't had that much of a life to begin with. Wayne Rooney's first autobiography, *My Story So Far*, came out when he was 20. What are we really going to learn from that? His love of chicken dippers? How many times he's been to Alton Towers? Autobiographies work best when it's an elder statesperson looking back over a long life well lived, not someone fresh out of school reminiscing about their favourite ninja turtle.

And then there's the often-tedious life of a footballer to consider. These aren't musicians regaling us with stories of drug-fuelled benders or actors indulging in a bit of 'kiss-and-tell'. They're professional athletes who have spent most of their adult lives keeping in good physical shape and doing the same thing, week in, week out, which is as boring as it sounds.

The masterwork in the tedious autobiography genre is unquestionably Sami Hyypiä's *From Voikkaa to the Premiership*. No entertaining stories and nothing about what shaped or motivated him. Instead, a description, in painstakingly tedious detail, of his progression from the Finnish town of Voikkaa to the Premier League. It's best

to think of it less as an autobiography and more of a sleep aid, like a stronger version of Temazepam (caution: side effects include thoughts of self-harm and an irrational hatred of Finns).

Footballers also live in something of a bubble, cushioned from the harsh realities of life by the protective embrace of the club. Inevitably, this can occasionally create unsympathetic figures, whose perceived injustices and petty point-scoring leave a bad taste in the mouth of those unfortunate enough to have wasted their money on their magnum opus.

The go-to benchmark for the unsympathetic memoir will always be Ashley Cole's *My Defence*, a tome that might have been better titled *Detailed Reasons Why You Should Hate Me*. Cole spends great swathes of the book railing against the financial injustices that were inflicted upon him, such as the horror of being a 19-year-old earning just £25,000. The lesson of the book seems to be that Cole's life would have been so much better if only people had given him the vast amounts of money he thought he was worth.

But at least his title, with its play on words, was relatively imaginative. The same can't be said for so many others in this genre.

Most are hopelessly simplistic: *My Life in Football* – Robbie Fowler, *A Life in Football* – Ian Wright, *My Life in Football* – Kevin Keegan. It doesn't bode well for the book if the first words, those that are meant to draw you in, have all the pyrotechnic punch of an indoor firework.

Mind you, even when they do put in a bit of thought, the results can be frustrating, like Garry Monk's *Loud*,

*Proud and Positive*, which, with its LGBTQ connotations, gives the impression of a book that's going to be a lot more sexually revelatory than it really is.

The old adage is that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. But if you see a picture of a famous footballer on the front, and that cover also contains the word 'autobiography', then judge away and save your money.