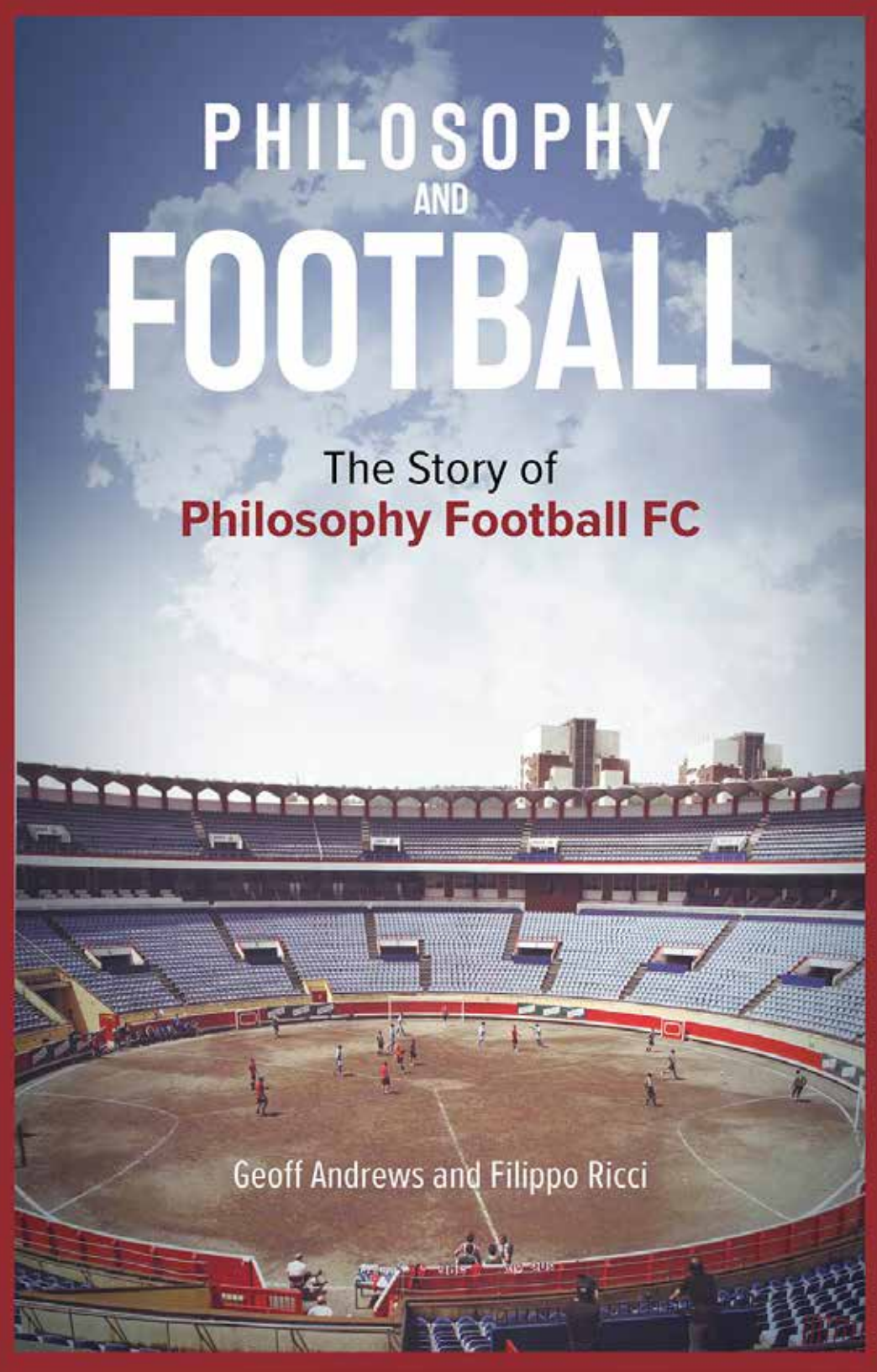


PHILOSOPHY AND FOOTBALL

The Story of
Philosophy Football FC

Geoff Andrews and Filippo Ricci



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In Search of Philosophical Football



IT ALL started in 1994, in the midst of a significant era for British football which was still echoing to the arias of 'Nessun dorma' of Italia '90. It was in 1994 that Eric Cantona, arguably the most philosophical of footballers,

who had enthralled fans in the first years of the Premier League, was voted the Professional Footballers' Association's Player of the Year, the first non-Brit to win the award since its inauguration 20 years earlier. The prospect of football reaching wider audiences had been mooted two years before with the publication of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* and, for some, 1994 was the seminal moment in the modernisation of the people's game, with the introduction of all-seater stadia, and the highest attendances since 1980/81. Though it was another two years before the Arsène Wenger revolution began to transform the style and tactics of British football, the game was being enlightened by the influx of foreign players – which escalated again the following year with the introduction of the Bosman ruling – and more tactically minded coaches.

Critics would add that it was also the beginning of the 'gentrification' of football, the period in which the beautiful game became disconnected from its roots, where the corporate bosses took charge and when satellite TV started to set the agenda. Its darker side remained too, with one of Wenger's predecessors, George Graham, having to resign in the wake of a 'bung' scandal that year and one of his star players, Paul Merson, admitting his addiction to drugs and gambling. In any case, the game would never be the same again, and the story of this club is bound up with these developments.

However, the founding of Philosophy Football FC – possibly the only club to have the words 'football' appear twice in its name – has more obscure, immediate origins. These are to be found in the decline of the small British

Communist Party (CPGB) which, on the fall of the Soviet Union, called it a day in 1991 and turned itself into the short-lived Democratic Left. Three years later, Tony Blair was elected Labour leader and began his attempts to modernise his party by ditching some of its core values. Mark Perryman and Geoff Andrews had been members of the CPGB on its Eurocommunist, *Marxism Today* wing and in the aftermath of the Communist Party's demise, they met regularly as Signs of the Times, a discussion group set up and convened by Perryman which held its gatherings in a Swedish restaurant in Newington Green. Its weekly interrogation of the 'conjuncture' included such topics as postmodernism, Blairism, Europe, globalisation and the trends in popular culture. Football, they believed, was one of those cultural 'terrains' that the beleaguered left could not ignore.

In October 1994 Queens Park Rangers (Andrews' team) were a solid Premier League side and he and Perryman (a Tottenham supporter) would regularly attend matches together, albeit seated in different parts of the ground. It was after one of these, a 1-1 draw at White Hart Lane where Jürgen Klinsmann had failed to impress for the hosts and Les Ferdinand saw red for the visitors, that the post-match conversation turned to politics, football and the existentialist writer Albert Camus. Maybe the search for meaning takes on a new importance after a dull draw or perhaps Andrews and Perryman were still suffering the fallout from the end of the CP, but in any case the two friends together with Perryman's partner, Anne Coddington (another Tottenham season-ticket holder who would later

write a book on women and football, *One of the Lads*), and Tom Callaghan, a QPR-supporting friend of Andrews and a key figure in the club's early years, came up with the idea of a football shirt adorned with Camus's words, 'All that I know most surely about morality and obligation I owe to football.' By Christmas, Perryman, a brilliant organiser, catalyst and entrepreneur of left-wing causes, was selling them from his kitchen table after recruiting the talented graphic designer Hugh Tisdale to the project. The idea of Philosophy Football, 'outfitters of intellectual distinction', was born, with an impressive squad of footballers and philosophers to follow Camus.

In the meantime, Andrews began to think about the idea of a real Philosophy Football team. If starting a new squad composed entirely of philosophers was out of the question (he knew only two or three), then at least a team of 'progressive' left-wingers could be assembled. Prospects were not helped by his lack of experience. His own football career had peaked at the age of 12 as captain of his junior school team and his later experience at Oxford in the Ruskin College Second XI, and appearing for the *Marxism Today* five-a-side team in Cardiff merely marked a further descent into footballing oblivion. Nor did he have any football connections with amateur leagues, given most of his recent years had been spent in the doldrums of British left activism. Finding players for Sunday football is never easy and this was the period before emails and mobile phones.

Getting players on to the pitch was the first challenge. The second, which would take many more years to solve, was to come up with 11 players whose fitness and ability

would be sufficient to avoid weekly humiliation. Following two hastily arranged and poorly attended training sessions, a team comprised of ex-communists and Democratic Left members, left-wing journalists and assorted politics, history and sociology lecturers took the pitch for the first game at Battersea Park on Sunday, 19 March 1995, the day that the other ‘reds’ – Liverpool and Manchester United – faced each other at Anfield. PFFC’s line-up included Gareth Smyth, a journalist on *New Times*, the paper of the post-communist Democratic Left; Stefan Howald, a Swiss journalist and member of the Signs of the Times group; Dominic Ford, a Democratic Left activist; and sixth-form teachers Tom Callaghan and Imran Rahman. All of whom, along with Andrews, would play regularly in the early years. Unfortunately, Howald, at 41 and by some way PFFC’s outstanding (and quickest) player, pulled a muscle in the warm-up and could only watch from the sidelines. Mark Perryman made his one and only appearance for the team, nicely turned out with new boots and exhibiting much energy, even if, like his team-mates, he rarely got near the ball. By then, Perryman and Tisdale had produced their second shirt, in honour of Bill Shankly. His socialist collectivism (‘The socialism I believe in is everyone working for each other, everyone having a share of the rewards. It’s the way I see football, the way I see life’) appealed to the ten outfield players who wore red for the first time. Andrews wore Camus green in goal.

Unfortunately, any sartorial elegance didn’t compensate for events once the match got under way. The first problem was that all the outfield players kitted out in red

Shankly wore the same number, four, a phenomenon that was unlikely to have been previously encountered by a referee had there indeed been one. The second problem was that few of the players had played 11-a-side football before. These problems were compounded when another philosopher withdrew with a thigh strain in the opening five minutes. It was only the charitable instincts of the opponents, Voluntary Services Overseas – perhaps a pointer to the club’s later international adventures – that saved the team from no more than a 4-0 drubbing.

Whatever the early teething problems, there was enough goodwill and enthusiasm to continue. Hopes were raised when in the next match the team took an early 1-0 lead against Time Out, only to go down to a spirited 2-1 defeat. The recurring oddity of all the outfield players wearing the same number on their back was picked up by an *Independent* journalist, presumably covering the match in search of a new cultural trend, who commented on the confusion in the opposition ranks when team-mates were told to ‘mark number four’. At least Andrews, paraphrasing Marx’s 11th thesis on Feuerbach (and inscribed on his gravestone at Highgate Cemetery), was able to reassure the readership that Philosophy Football was more than a t-shirt, ‘Philosophers only interpret the game; the point is to play it.’

As Andrews continued the search for philosophers who could play, the virtual squad assembled from Perryman’s kitchen table in South Tottenham expanded, benefitting not only from the increasing customer base but also from the antics of the philosopher-footballer par excellence, Eric Cantona. In January 1995, Cantona had caused controversy

and earned himself a ban (with community service added on) for a karate kick aimed at a Crystal Palace supporter in a Premier League match at Selhurst Park. In the ensuing media inquests, Cantona, irked by the attention his antics had brought, uttered the words, 'When the seagulls follow the trawler, it is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea.' As the press tried to make sense of these pearls of wisdom, Perryman and Tisdale quickly got the Cantona shirt out. On the pitch, the team felt they had a common spirit.

The success of the PhilosophyFootball.com company provided a useful network for player recruitment, which would pay off in the coming years. In the short term the practicalities of getting a team out every week was still a big problem. That it was managed at all was largely due to the Andrews–Gareth Smyth partnership. Smyth, an unofficial assistant manager who had previously run another left-wing football outfit, had good links with a couple of exiled ANC-supporting South Africans who brought skill and flair to the team. He also had good connections with some of the rising New Labour entourage, including Tim Allan from the Blair press office who briefly appeared for the team; this provoked one or two philosophical discussions, though political differences seemed less significant than the skilful Allan's inability to pass to his team-mates.

Smyth had all the attributes needed of Sunday League football organisers, namely access to players and a rigid determination never to accept 'no' when seeking their availability. On the pitch he would maintain a civilised conversation with the referee, though his rallying call to

his team-mates was normally confined to a quiet request to 'mark-up, gentlemen' at set pieces. He made up for lack of pace and ball skills with canny positioning and the occasional professional foul. Off the pitch, he and Andrews held protracted early morning discussions about tactics. With 4-4-2 the favoured system at the time, much attention was placed on the two central midfielders – who would have the 'holding' role? – while finding two centre-backs capable of dealing with the physical threat from Sunday League forwards was also a regular topic. Central defence would remain one of the most difficult positions to fill, made more complicated by the absence of linesmen at that level. Centre-backs had to be strong enough to deal with the physical challenges and mobile enough to cover for forward runs from offside positions. Mainly though, these tactical discussions remained at an abstract level: getting 11 players on the pitch was always the priority at this time.

Nevertheless, with the arrival of some better players and despite some more friendly thrashings – 6-3 to St Bartholomew's Hospital, and 8-2 to Hoxton Pirates – over the summer, the team entered the Musical Association League Division Two for the 1995/96 season. The choice of the Musical Association League (set up by Radio 1 celebrities in 1984 and still in existence today) was mainly on the grounds that it seemed the 'friendliest' league available. It was only later that the team recruited some musicians and distributed an annual CD among the squad. Home matches were to be played at Regent's Park. Though PFFC's home pitch would change over the years, Regent's Park remained the spiritual base for many of the team and the venue for

some of its finest – and most forgettable – moments. It was also a very convenient location. Unlike conventional Sunday League teams which were normally formed by players from the same locality, or the midweek work- and office-based teams, PFFC always drew on players from across London, the majority of whom had moved to the capital for work. As the team developed over the years, its main identity would be as a team of adopted Londoners, symptomatic of the modern London diaspora.

The transition to regular league football was not a success. Despite an unexpected early home point in a 2-2 draw, PFFC were on the receiving end of a series of heavy losses: 11-0 and 7-1 to St Pauli, the eventual champions, and 6-1 to Cobra Sports, among them. PFFC had only one point by Christmas. The team had to wait until the beginning of February for its first victories in an unexpected purple patch, when it followed a 5-2 league win with an unlikely act of cup giant-killing in defeating Apollo XI, from the exalted heights of the Musical Association League Division One. The 4-3 result, in a bad-tempered if exciting affair, ended with PFFC holding on despite two late goals. This abrupt change of fortune was largely due to the acquisition of a new young Cypriot forward, Billi – but nicknamed Romario – whose goalscoring exploits brought a new dimension to the team. His appearance also necessitated a change in formation that temporarily proved successful; a 4-5-1, capable of quickly switching to 5-4-1 as required. These victories were fleeting moments, a temporary respite against a wider trend of mediocrity. Keith Williams, a Liverpoolian primary school teacher who played on the left wing in front

of Andrews at full-back, once scored a spectacular goal from inside his own half at Maida Vale only to see his team lose 10-1.

Odd victories apart, PFFC's first full season was proving to be more than a challenge. Regular Sunday morning matches (and occasional afternoon fixtures) represented a commitment many were unprepared for, while the routines and practices of Sunday League football came as a culture shock. The physical side took its toll on ageing players, who faced the added difficulty of having to adapt to both grass and astroturf. The dressing rooms at Regent's Park often resembled a mud bath in the race to get into the showers under the strict orders of the matriarch in charge who always turned the hot water off promptly at 4pm; on one occasion, later described in Pete May's book *Sunday Muddy Sunday*, PFFC players were left literally in a cold sweat with mud trickling down their knees as the clock ticked past four.

In addition to Regent's Park, PFFC also played home matches at Caledonian Road in Islington and Paddington Rec, Maida Vale, both astroturf surfaces, which left their marks. Stefan Howald, a remarkably fit and agile forward who would continue playing for PFFC into his mid-50s, was one of several who would regularly leave the pitch with cuts to the knees and arms. In his case, the application of *grappa*, from the Ticino (Italian-speaking) region of Switzerland, by his partner Renee, was found to be the best solution.

Some of the exchanges on the pitch were another eye-opener for the team. Even in a friendly league the banter in Sunday football is not for the faint-hearted and for a while PFFC was outshouted and undone by more skilful, physical

and streetwise opponents. Referees, who always seemed to have a thankless and poorly rewarded task – one of the main managerial roles at this level was to sort out a ref for home matches – could often be swayed by vocal opponents, which was not PFFC's style. Where other teams might hurl abuse at the referee for not awarding a penalty, Tom Callaghan would pick the ball up and with quiet irony place it on the penalty spot before calmly retreating to his position as right-back. His quiet, quizzical response to the possibility of any fracas – 'are you calling me a Kant?' – was lost on opponents. The team struggled throughout the season, but did at least receive a trophy, awarded perhaps as much to gratitude from the opponents for the easy wins, as well as a little genuine affection. It was inscribed, 'Gone to the dogs. Bottom of the League. Philosophy Football'.

By the end of the first season, PhilosophyFootball.com had expanded its range of shirts – adding the likes of Brian Clough, postmodernist Jean Baudrillard and the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci – and Perryman, Tisdale and their team of volunteers had organised a major event on London's South Bank, titled Europe United, to coincide with Euro '96. The event included a 'Football Fashion Show' in the Purcell Room Foyer, a 'European Fans Forum', a two-man revue on 'The Complete History of the World Cup', one-man show on Albert Camus and a men's and women's four-a-side football tournament organised by PFFC which was held on the ground floor of the Royal Festival Hall, with two pillars in the centre of the pitch. Their opponents included the Zapatistas, the Half-Time Oranges and Fantasy Football. In a crunch match against the latter, Graham

Kelly, the FA's chief executive, guesting for PFFC on the day and kitted out in an Antonio Gramsci shirt, scored one of the goals in a 2-1 victory. Among the on-looking supporters, David Dein, then Arsenal vice-chairman, was heard to chant 'there's only one Graham Kelly'.

That event proved to be a welcome respite from the weekly exertion which now resembled some of the typical characteristics of a Sunday League team. However interesting and different the team was in personnel and in its noble attempt to be something different from the everyday rituals of Sunday League football, it is not much fun if you lose every week. This was despite the fact that over the course of the season the Philosophy Football network had continued to bring in some interesting players. Nicholas Royle, an aspiring novelist, had offered his services as a goalkeeper who had actually read Camus. Given PFFC already had a keeper, and with his short stature in mind, Royle was quickly converted into a tenacious, tough-tackling right-back. For each home match, Royle would be seen arriving at Regent's Park with his head in a book; he seemed the ideal recruit. In later years, as novelist, short story writer and lecturer, he would reach the heights of the England Writers' team. However, his PFFC career was cut short. By the end of the first season, Royle, who had originally been 'poached' from Time Out (one of PFFC's early friendly opponents), had become disillusioned by the despondency which marked every defeat, and was 'relieved' when the early morning calls stopped coming. 'They were the least philosophical team I've ever played in,' he wrote in a later *New Statesman* diary item. 'In defeat, that is. Took it

very badly. Even talked about training sessions. No thank you. Not my idea of Sunday football.'

The loss of Gareth Smyth, who left for the Middle East for a prolific career as journalist and editor, initially in Beirut and then Tehran (where he was the *Financial Times* correspondent) at the end of that year, was a severe blow and it appeared to Andrews that the team was a long way from reconciling the thoughts of Albert Camus with the difficulties of dealing with pacy forwards on a wet Sunday morning. The routines and the defeats were taking their toll on the manager. Andrews was disillusioned and stood down at the end of the season, leaving Dom Ford, the first in a long line of Liverpudlian centre-backs, in charge, ably assisted by Tom Callaghan, Imran Rahman and Stefan Howald. Over the next three seasons, Philosophy Football continued as a Sunday League team, winning more matches but developing little of a philosophical identity. It shared the problems that all Sunday League teams face at one time or the other: a continual and sometimes losing struggle to get a full team out. The following year started in the same way as the inaugural season with heavy defeats to the likes of West XI, Cobra and Red Star Camden (10-1 on ice, in the cup). In many of the games PFFC started with nine or fewer players, with its obvious effects on team spirit. Nevertheless, a couple of late wins and a walkover (awarded when the opponents don't show) ensured an improvement to second from bottom.

The 1997/98 season saw Imran Rahman in charge following Dom Ford's departure. Rahman was a skilful player who served the team in a variety of positions. He was

probably best in the centre of midfield, where as one of the few naturally gifted players at that time he bore resemblance to the later Luka Modrić, spreading passes and cajoling his team-mates to ever greater endeavours. He demanded the same levels of passionate commitment from others as he expended himself. This was a battle he ultimately couldn't win, however. Getting 11 players on the pitch remained a major hurdle and indeed also affected some of PFFC's opponents. The season featured the usual mix of heavy defeats, narrow victories and the occasional walkover. At one of their last fixtures that season, the players arrived at Regent's Park on a warm spring afternoon to find their opponents already engaged in another match. They had fallen behind with their games and had to make up by playing back-to-back. Well-beaten and exhausted after the first match they nevertheless managed to beat PFFC in their second. The team was as far away as it had been from marrying football with philosophy. At the end of the year, the United Nations of Football, another big alternative football event organised by Perryman and Tisdale on the South Bank, offered a further reminder of the growing divergence between the pleasures of Philosophy Football off the pitch and the pains of Philosophy Football FC on it.

The following season started as before with bad-tempered affairs, cup exits and the last-minute recruitment of players from the park to make up the numbers. In its first match PFFC again had to recruit three players from the touchline and trailed to Black Vinyl Hearts by the break. It was too much for Stefan Howald, who quit in disgust at half-time. It was a clear signal of decline and by the end

of that season PFFC found itself with neither a team nor a philosophy.

The following season, 1999/2000, partly encouraged by the success of PhilosophyFootball.com, whose range of shirts and events had expanded, Andrews started again: determined this time to unite philosophy and football. He had some mild optimism that the organisational burden could be reduced. Mobile phones had arrived and some players even had email addresses. The days of leaving late-night phone messages with flat-mates or on the answerphones of players' girlfriends was hopefully over. With Howald and Callaghan the only continuing players, new recruits were found via the Philosophy Football newsletter, the *New Statesman* and *When Saturday Comes*. Tony Batt, a Tottenham-supporting web designer who had carried out work for the Philosophy Football company, joined on the precondition there would be no training. He was promptly made captain of the new-look team. Batt, an admirer of Robin Friday, the wayward, undisciplined, skilful forward for Reading and Cardiff – one of England's greatest football misfits – played in a variety of roles in the team until fitness got the better of him. Simon Carmel, an academic and another utility man who could play anywhere across the defence, became a reliable player and an even more expert scout for the team. He was responsible for bringing in two of PFFC's most important players: Paul Kayley, who would captain the team in its most successful period, and Alan Johns, a Cornish barrister who, as a tricky winger in the old-fashioned mode, once had a trial for Lou Macari's Swindon, and belonged to the same church as

Carmel. A third Carmel recruit, Mark ‘Goober’ Fox, would play a key role off the pitch in sustaining the club’s website over the best part of two decades.

Kayley, a computer programmer, had recently moved to London from the north-west. Though he was a regular five-a-side player he had played little 11-a-side and had been put off by the culture of pub football. Turning up for a friendly he was both impressed by the civility and mix of his new team-mates as well as surprised to find that, in his early 30s, he was one of the youngest players in the team. Andrews was in his late 30s, Callaghan was in his early 40s (as was Danny Burke, a friend he had brought to the team), and Howald by this time was in his late 40s.

Despite these new recruits, things would get worse before they improved. This makeshift outfit, in the process of being rebuilt, still relied on getting additional players – a girlfriend’s brother, a work-mate, friend of a friend, sometimes recruiting players hanging about on the sidelines – in order to get a team out. The problems with this strategy for a team with philosophical as well as football ambitions, erupted one afternoon in east London – in what was later to be known in club folklore as ‘The Battle of Mile End’, where insults and punches were thrown on both sides, red cards were issued and the game was abandoned. Andrews was mortified and only persuaded to carry on after several pints of Guinness in the post-mortem held in the pub afterwards. Things would have to change.

He decided that from now on there could be no compromises on philosophy. The Philosophy Football network was still expanding and there was the chance to

recruit more like-minded players. Never a party political concern, PFFC was stumbling towards a shared ethos broad enough to accommodate Johns (promptly nicknamed ‘Cornish Al’), who had recently become a committed Christian and was conservatively minded in politics, and Raj Chada, a defence lawyer and future Labour leader of Camden Council, who turned up one Sunday in his Shankly shirt. A tough-tackling midfielder, he and Johns, both in their mid-20s and then the youngest players in the team, would form one of the key partnerships as PFFC sought to rebuild.

The team needed a new goalkeeper. Previously filled by ‘Greek Andy’, one of Gareth Smyth’s recruits, and occasionally by Andrews himself, it was a key position. Renowned for their individuality and eccentricity, and often a law unto themselves, getting the right person was crucial. Vassilis Fouskas, a university colleague of Andrews, had been a former goalkeeper from the lower levels of the Greek professional league. He seemed a perfect addition. At well over six feet tall, Fouskas initially intimidated his team-mates with his vigorous warm-up routines but then had them in awe by somehow reaching a shot destined for the top corner. For some time after, ‘that save’ would be recounted by those who saw it. However, Fouskas was the antithesis of the many academics who had recently become enraptured by football. Having seen the corrupt side of the game in Greece, he now had little interest in football and was totally committed to his academic career (later becoming a politics professor).

Rob Adams had been one half of the two-man revue on the history of the World Cup at the Europe United event

three years earlier, though was then unknown to Andrews. He had turned out a bit in goal for Sporting Hackney Second XI but was struck by PFFC's eclectic ad in *When Saturday Comes*. Adams, an actor and drama teacher, would play for the club for the next 20 years, when he was well into his 50s. His PFFC career nearly ended on its first day, however. On arrival at Regent's Park for his first game against London Weekend Television, he only paid the parking meter until half-time, a situation which unnerved his manager.

Adams, along with Johns, Chada, Kayley, Fox and other new recruits had been vital in building a camaraderie among the players, which for some time after continued to compensate for poor results on the pitch. Heavy defeats meant another bottom-of-the table finish was guaranteed from early on, with their one league victory, achieved in a late-season clash against a team also at the wrong end of the table, a moment for celebration. The team, with several players over 40, was beginning to enjoy itself at least, and held its first election of player of the year (won by Adams, by now 'Rob the Cat' after brilliant individual performances) over borsch, duck and vodka at Patio, a Polish restaurant in Shepherd's Bush.

This new spirit of unity was strengthened when Stefan Howald, through his contacts in Zurich, organised PFFC's first European football tour in June 2000. Before moving to London as a correspondent for his Swiss newspaper, Howald had played for FC Levante Wibi, which had been founded in the 1970s by an anarchist collective. Now he took equal pride in introducing his team-mates to his city and his old team to his London squad of philosophers. After

the team had assembled at Luton Airport for the first of what would be many early morning flights on the low-cost airlines, they were met in Zurich by their host and veteran striker, who took them on a tour of the old town, posing for photos outside Lenin's old house and stopping at sights and bars along the way. The accommodation provided by their opponents included a commune, which caused confusion for some of the players on the way home that evening who found themselves lost in a neighbouring apartment.

The next day, a tactical team talk over brunch was followed by an early arrival at the sports ground for the match. The pitch was a step up from what the team had previously encountered. Beautiful surroundings, a decent-sized crowd and convivial, like-minded opponents. Training was still anathema to most of the squad but some limbering-up exercises were carried out on the outskirts of the pitch. The team's traditional red colours had been supplemented by the company's navy training tops, adorned with each individual player's initials. The match itself, played in a great spirit, yielded yet another defeat (4-0), despite some promising moves. Congratulations were offered by both captains and Andrews made an impromptu speech extolling the virtues of European unity. The post-match fraternising carried on long into the night. As the first PFFC tour, the experience made a lasting impression on Andrews, and suggested that Europe could be the answer to the club's search for an identity. He could not have foreseen the ways in which this would become a reality, from the changing composition of the squad to the style of football and even the post-match food.

However, there remained one outstanding matter that needed urgent attention. He knew from experience that however harmonious the team appeared to be, you could only keep losing for a limited time before players became disillusioned. Plus, there seemed to be a perennial question at the back of his mind, which had troubled many philosophers though presumably few who had managed football teams. In building a different kind of team, where do you draw the line between philosophy and praxis? Or, put another way, to what extent do you compromise your principles for the sake of getting three points on the board? He felt he had only half a team – Adams, Johns, Chada, Kayley and Howald – with the necessary quality and fitness to be competitive on a weekly basis. The search was on for the others.

