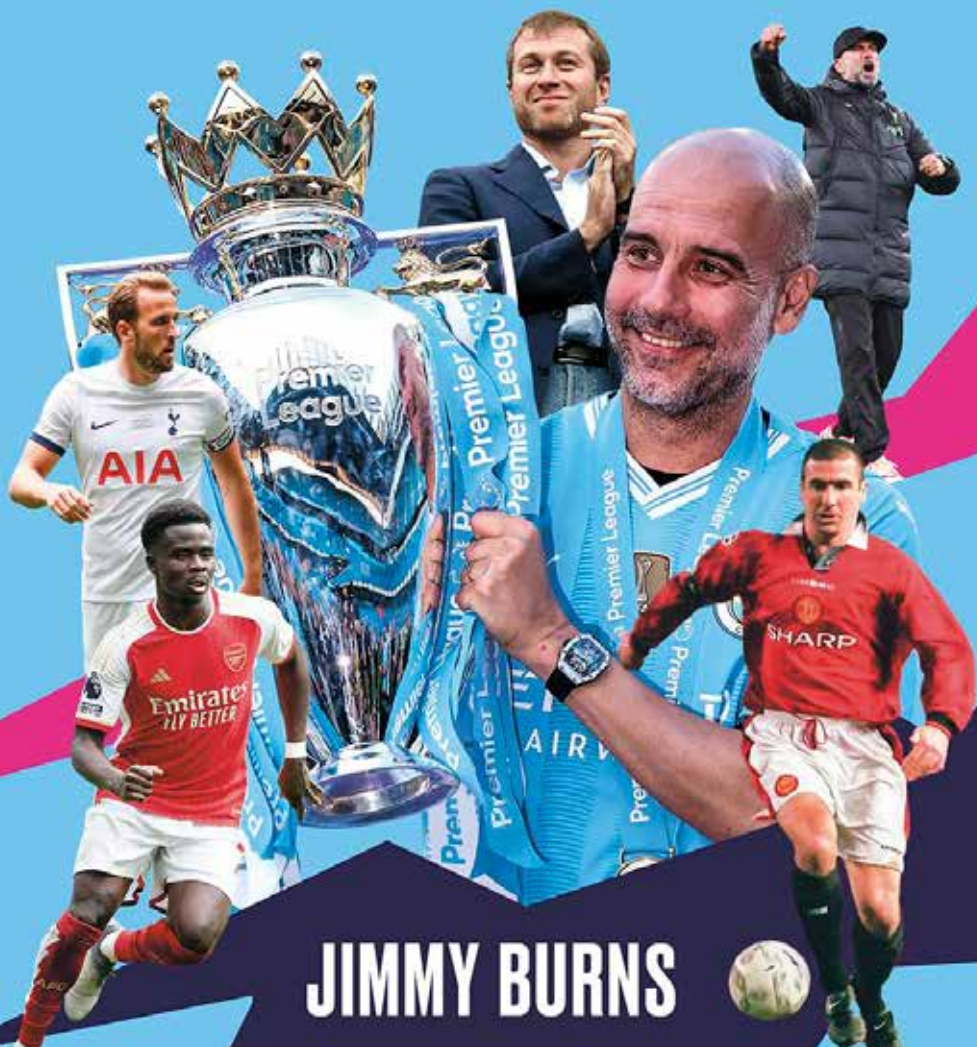


THE PREMIER

BIG BUSINESS AND GREAT FOOTBALL



JIMMY BURNS



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Chapter One

Brief History

A FREEZING English winter day in early 1993, in the first season of the Premier League that had begun the previous summer and had loyal fans of all generations packing stadiums up and down the country, and a fledgling but growing audience on satellite TV. In north London, thousands converged on Highbury, one of Europe's oldest stadiums, given the affectionate nickname of 'the Home of Football' by Arsenal. A young English journalist, my friend and colleague Simon Kuper, was among those gathered to watch a match between the home team and the visitors from the north of England, Leeds United.

Arsenal are one of the longest-established football clubs in the world. They are popularly known as 'the Gunners', as the club was founded in the glory days of the British Empire in 1886 for the benefit of munitions workers in the Royal Arsenal factory. Their opponents Leeds United, founded 30 years later, had as their anthem the no less imperialistic 'Marching on Together', a defiant cry steeped in nostalgia.

Leeds had followed the English empire into gradual decline since the 1960s and 70s when, under the English international-turned-manager Don Revie, they had earned a reputation for a highly physical brand of football: more brute force than art.

The football world changed after the days of Revie. The emergence of a modern, English club game was signalled in

1969, three years after England won the first FIFA World Cup to be held in the English-speaking world. It was the year that the legendary Sir Matt Busby, the manager of Manchester United for 24 years, announced his retirement and Britain's most successful post-war cultural export, the Beatles, performed together for the final time, on the rooftop of Apple Records in London. In the same year, the Rolling Stones performed a free festival in Hyde Park in front of at least a quarter of a million fans, two days after the death of one of the group's founders Brian Jones; Manchester City won the FA Cup in a 1-0 win over Leicester City at Wembley and Leeds United won the pre-Premier Football League First Division.

1969 was the year when Maurice Edwards, a World War Two veteran who became a player then an influential agent during the post-war decades, wrote that there was a 'super league within Division 1', that was beginning to pull away from the rest. According to football writer Jonathan Wilson, 'There were no hedge-funds, sovereign wealth or public investment, and no oligarchs but there was awareness that as English football's popularity grew – and thanks to the BBC's *Match of the Day* and England's World Cup win, it became mass entertainment – there was a risk that a self-perpetuating elite would emerge.'

And yet English club football's evolution to the best league in the world had a way to go, still. It would take nearly another quarter of a century for English football to start the great enterprise of restoring the pre-eminent global status of the game's 19th century founders. The new pioneers of the late 20th century embraced a model for the national league that in time would impact on the character and business of international football as we know it today, with the foundation of the English Premier League. When it reached its 30th anniversary in August 2022 it boasted that it had become the best league in the world.

In January 1993, for the visit of Leeds United, Arsenal's aged Highbury stadium was only two-thirds full with a crowd of just over 26,000. That venue was dwarfed by comparison with the size and reputation of two great rival cathedrals of sport, home to two giant champions of *La Liga* and European football, FC Barcelona's Camp Nou and Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu. The historical cultural and political rivalry between *La Liga's* two great clubs had always fascinated me.

Unlike my friend Kuper, I was not at Highbury that day – but I have no regrets. Kuper had bought himself a cheap £5 ticket which meant that his view of the match was partly blocked by several lines of spectators standing in front of him. He failed to get a sighting of any of the four goals scored at his end of the stadium. But watching the match highlights some years later on YouTube, what struck Kuper was that almost every player was white and British, and that the game lacked any refined movement on or off the ball. It was 'dreadful', he said.

The match was a bruising, physical encounter, very different from the skills on display in Spain's *La Liga*, in those times when it was of more interest to me – Johan Cruyff's 'dream team' at Barca, and the similarly legendary Real Madrid of the *Quinta del Buitre* era, with their talented, intuitive, intelligent players who helped develop Spanish club football as a creative spectacle.

In 1988, Manuel Pellegrini, a retired Chilean centre-back who would in time go on to manage top Spanish and English clubs, attended a coaching course at Lilleshall, the Football Association's school of excellence, with the course including classes taught by Alex Ferguson. 'It was tackles and muddy pitches and heads crashing together,' Pellegrini later recalled.

Fast forward to March 2023, on the eve of a Europa League encounter between the latest club to come under his coaching Real Betis, and Ten Hag's Manchester United, and Pellegrini cheekily told *La Liga's* veteran journalist Sid Lowe,

‘England has the best league, but the best football is played in Spain.’

Going back to the 20th century, the gap that had opened between top-flight English and Spanish clubs was underlined in November 1994 by Manchester United’s 0-4 Champions League group stage defeat by Barca before a 112,000-capacity crowd at the Camp Nou. ‘We were well and truly slaughtered,’ commented United’s manager Alex Ferguson after one of the most humiliating defeats suffered by the English champions since the Scot had taken over as manager. For weeks afterwards, Manchester United would have fans from other English clubs taunting them by singing ‘Barcelona’ the theme song of the 1992 Summer Olympics created by Queen’s Freddie Mercury and the opera singer Montserrat Caballé.

I remember dining with Real Madrid general manager and Argentina star Jorge Valdano in a Spanish tapas bar near Paddington, London, during the UEFA European Championships in 1996. He told me that when he thought of English football he still imagined flying towards the old Wembley and seeing a ball rise up into the air at one end of the stadium and then land at the other – the long ball of English football, full of passionate intent, but devoid of creativity and technique.

The Premier League would come to change all that, with teams still looking for the fastest route to scoring goals, but with new systems and strategies, and the quality of play all improved by the arrival of hundreds of foreigners, among them players and managers and investors who would transform the English game. *La Liga* continued to present a major challenge, with Real Madrid and Barca widely respected internationally as giants of the game, each destined to be responsible for the most enduring rivalry of superstars in modern football history – that between Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi.

But as Europe emerged from the pandemic in the 2021/22 season, it was the English Premier League that seemed best-

placed to strengthen its claim to being the richest, most competitive and passionate domestic league in the world. During the 2021/22 season, two English clubs (Manchester City and Liverpool) and two Spanish clubs (Villareal and Real Madrid) reached the semi-finals of the Champions League. Liverpool were beaten by Real Madrid in the final. But it was the Premier League title race, so competitively fought over by quality contenders Guardiola's Manchester City and Klopp's Liverpool, that drew an enthusiastic global audience, with matches transmitted around the world. Even while the pandemic had restricted the attendance of fans at stadiums which were used to always being filled, the English Premier League had become the most popular competition in sporting history, watched by more viewers than any other league in the world, and by a universal following that ignored national frontiers and cultural boundaries.

Written to mark the 30th anniversary of the Premier League in 2022, this book is a brief but colourful history of English club football, the curiosities and stand-out moments of its most significant teams and the fascinating stories of its key owners, managers, players, fans, and chroniclers. It does not pretend to be a complete let alone definitive history, but I hope readers will find, beyond the purely anecdotal, a narrative that is incisive, enlightening and entertaining.

While I acknowledge the debt I owe to the observations of others as I have written this book, I take full responsibility for selection of content, drawing on my own roots and experiences as points of references. I write from the perspective of an Anglo-Spaniard who has spent his life immersed in the cultures of two great football nations with a history of mutual respect, as well as occasional hostility and rivalry.

I was born in Madrid and brought up and educated in England, thanks to my Spanish mother and English father. My first memory of a football game was being taken as a child by a friend of my Spanish grandfather, Dr Gregorio

Marañón, to see Real Madrid in the Bernabeu stadium and hearing one player's name mentioned more than any other, Alfredo di Stéfano.

My dreams of becoming a professional footballer ended when I was in primary school in London. A tackle by my Basque classmate, the son of a diplomat from Bilbao, cut me down in full flight and left me with a gashed knee and broken finger. From then on, I stuck to being a fan of more than one club in two countries, and pursued a career as a journalist and author, occasionally writing books and articles about football.

These days, when in London, between visits elsewhere in the UK and to Spain, I spend most mornings exercising in a large oasis of urban green space, Battersea Park, next to where the river Thames marks the natural border between the south and north of a metropolis inhabited by the fans of three great English football clubs, Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham. In Battersea Park, I often pause to watch young kids kick a ball around, imitating the gestures of the icons they watch on TV or in their computer games. They play near a plaque commemorating the site where the first official match of football, according to English Football Association rules, was played, on 9 January 1864, seven years after the foundation in 1857 of Sheffield FC, the world's oldest football club.

I thank the English for introducing us to a sport that over more than a century has become much-loved by a global community, because you don't have to be born rich to succeed in it or enjoy it, even if the business of football is today in the hands of rich men, and players earn more in a month than ordinary mortals can dream of.

The English were destined to be pioneers of the sport, and their railway and mining engineers taught it to pupils in the Spanish-speaking world from Rio Tinto near Huelva, to Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao and Buenos Aires. In time it was the pupils who got one up on their masters, and took the game

to another level, one characterised by style, skill and success, which their masters would then learn from.

As a schoolboy in London in the early 1960s, I was a fan of Tottenham Hotspur, the first British team to triumph in Europe, following in the footsteps of Real Madrid. I collected stickers of their star player, one of the greatest strikers of all time, Jimmy Greaves. At the age of 13, in 1966, it was English blood, which I owe to my late father, that ran through my veins, and my excitement was boosted when England beat Argentina, then Portugal and finally West Germany to win the World Cup at Wembley, captained by the ultimate Anglo-Saxon gentleman of the game, Bobby Moore.

I remember watching Moore and his team-mates celebrating their victory, greeting the crowds from the balcony of Kensington's Royal Garden hotel, where they were staying near to a royal palace that many years later would be inhabited by Diana, Princess of Wales.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, English clubs coached by British managers dominated European competitions. The island race, which Churchill had promoted as destined to resist and conquer, and which had emerged full of self-esteem from World War Two, seemed to find itself on the football pitch, only to disintegrate in tragedy.

In 1985, 39 people, mostly Italians, were crushed to death and hundreds injured at a European Cup Final after confrontation between Liverpool and Juventus supporters, provoked mainly by drunken English fans. Four years later, on 15 April 1989, one of the worst disasters in sporting history occurred at Hillsborough stadium in the northern English city of Sheffield, as 97 Liverpool fans died as a result of a crowd crush during the FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest. Hillsborough would later be blamed on poor policing and an antiquated stadium that treated fans no better than herded cattle. However English football became tainted by a reputation abroad for drunken and often violent

hooliganism on and off the pitch: the bad boys of Europe – appalling behaviour, poor sporting spirit and a domestic league seemingly in terminal decline with too many mediocre players who smoked and drank too much.

An official enquiry by a senior judge into the Hillsborough disaster produced the Taylor report, which led to major reforms in the domestic policing of English club football, the conversion of all major stadiums into an all-seater model, and restrictions on the consumption of alcohol inside the main stadiums.

My earlier football books mirrored the shifting landscape of the game in the Spanish-speaking world. My boyhood love of the Tottenham of the 60s endured, but with it came an interest in the fanaticism several of my English friends felt for other English clubs, some of which I enjoyed watching playing against the best of Spain at home and abroad. I wrote a biography of Diego Maradona, a history of Spanish football, books on Real Madrid and FC Barcelona and a double biography about the two players that over a decade dominated the game with the most enduring and brilliant rivalry between superstars in any league in Europe, Messi and Ronaldo.

And yet I was spending as much time in the UK as in Spain and as I watched English matches in stadiums, in pubs and in the comfort of my sitting room, I was conscious that something transformational was under way.

After the disaster of Hillsborough, British clubs were ordered to renovate and expand their stadiums or build new ones so that a majority of fans could sit comfortably rather than stand cramped together like matchsticks in a box. The hooligan element was outnumbered by a more diverse and global audience.

It was in October 1990 that the Premier League was seriously discussed for the first time at a dinner hosted by the media executive Greg Dyke, then head of sport of the commercial channel ITV, with representatives of the five

biggest clubs in the English Football League. The delegates around the meeting table were the director of Liverpool FC Noel White, Arsenal's co-owner and vice-chairman David Dein, life president of Everton FC Philip Carter, Manchester United chairman Martin Edwards and chairman of Tottenham Hotspur Irving Scholar.

The idea was that the five would sell their TV rights directly to the commercial terrestrial channel ITV, rather than continuing to participate in a package deal with the other 87 Football League clubs. Dyke believed it would be lucrative for ITV if the country's larger clubs were featured regularly on national television and wanted to discuss whether the clubs would be interested in a deal which would give them a larger share of the TV rights money. TV revenue had grown significantly during the late 1980s: in 1986, a two-year television deal was worth £6.3 million; by 1988, a four-year deal was worth £44 million. The money was divided among all the clubs across all four Football League divisions.

The five clubs decided to go ahead with forming an elite league. Plans were drawn up for the new Premier League, enabling it to be launched for the 1992/93 season.

The new league meant massive amounts of money for the participating clubs, of whom there were 20 at the start, and eventually 22. ITV offered £205 million for the television rights, but they found themselves in competition with the satellite service, Sky Television. ITV increased its bid to £262 million but was still outbid by Sky's owner Rupert Murdoch, who felt it would attract new customers.

The Premier League was founded on 20 February 1992, when it was confirmed that the first season would begin in August that year. The original 20 teams were drawn from the 1991/92 season's First Division. The system of promotion and relegation, involving three teams going up and three going down, continued.

But not even those present at its foundation dinner imagined what a global phenomenon the Premier League would become. As the inspirer of the competition, Greg Dyke recalled decades later: ‘Who would have foreseen that we’d end up with English football being largely owned by foreign owners, managed by foreign managers, and disproportionately played by foreign players?’

Two years after the historic Dyke meeting, Manchester United showed how far they had moved on from a past overshadowed by tragedy – the Munich plane crash of 6 February 1958, which claimed the lives of 23 people, including eight members of a golden generation of players, full of promise and potential, the ‘Busby Babes’, trained by pioneering, hands-on coach Matt Busby, who knew youth held the key to United’s success and the future of the game. The tragedy would endure in the club’s collective memory, incentivising it to rise again, in tribute to those whose lives had been cut short so suddenly, drawing on two ostensibly contradictory English assets: tradition and youth culture. Ten years on, in May 1968, a veteran survivor of the Munich crash Bobby Charlton lifted the European Cup won by Manchester United, the first time an English side had won the trophy.

Early in the first Premier League season, in September 1992, 17-year-old David Beckham, a player who would become synonymous with the modern celebrity culture, debuted for United, and the following spring, a foreigner, the Frenchman Eric Cantona, led them to the inaugural title. Cantona blazed a trail for other stylish and skilled non-English players, and was followed by many European coaches, who came to England and took a lead part in an evolving success story.

The numbers of foreigners entering the Premier League would accelerate following the 1995 Bosman ruling which lifted restrictions on EU players in national leagues. With the foreign players came innovative managers and foreign owners,

with a lot of money to spend, even if the political and business credentials of some of these big investors proved controversial.

Among the managers, the arrival of Arsène Wenger at Arsenal in 1996 was a key moment in the history of the Premier League. He transformed the diet of the English players and showed a good eye for bringing in foreign players with talent that could help transform the way a team played.

In 2003, the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea, his investment in the club seen by many of its fans as the main reason for its subsequent success at national and international level.

In the words of the football writer Jim White (a Manchester United fan): ‘We can wince at the company Abramovich kept. We can be appalled by the way he pillaged the Russian economy. We can wonder how he was ever allowed to seize control of such an important cultural asset as Chelsea FC. But of this there can be no doubt. Roman Abramovich revolutionised English football ... So successful was his stewardship – the club accumulated 19 major trophies in his time – that an inescapable conclusion is he knew what he was doing.’

For the next 19 years after the Russian’s arrival, the Premier League benefitted from the modern English custom of welcoming money from almost anywhere in the world, with wealthy Arabs, along with Asian, American and Russian billionaires buying up clubs, securing a major media presence and branding their merchandise.

Some saw English top-flight football becoming a globalised plutocracy. But if it was, as its critics claimed, an overpriced, foreign-owned bazaar, it was because it was facilitated by a free-market and liberal British economy, and because it was nationally and internationally popular, even if there were traditionalists that feared that football was in danger of losing its soul.

England’s failure to qualify for the Euro 2008 championships was blamed by the national captain Steve

Gerrard on the influx of foreign players at club level. A group of Manchester United fans would later protest against the club's American owners, the Glazer family, claiming they did not know anything about English football and were taking more money out of the club than investing in it. English fans were the first, in the spring of 2021, to rebel against the idea of a breakaway European Super League, which had six Premier League clubs among its proposed founding members.

And in March 2022, Abramovich had his assets seized and was effectively exiled from the UK after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, because his money had benefited from and helped finance the Putin regime – something that Chelsea fans and successive British governments had been happy to ignore for years.

Foreign investment across the English Premier League has resulted in multiple teams playing very high-quality and entertaining football, not least Chelsea, who competed with other big clubs for the English title as well as the European Champions League. The clubs fighting each season for the league crown and a place in Europe, and others competing hard on their coat tails or fighting to avoid relegation in games full of drama, made the Premier League the most competitive sporting show in the world. It contrasted with the German, Italian and French leagues, where one or two clubs had tended to monopolise the championship, and *La Liga*, where the main show for many years has been the *Clásico* battle between two ancient rivals, FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, not least in the Messi/Ronaldo years.

* * *

The emergence of a new generation of star English male players in the Premier League – some of them black and ready to stand up against racism – and the competitiveness and quality of the bigger clubs, along with the success of the English women's national squad which won the European

Championship in the summer of 2022, showed the English capacity for renewal and enterprise, reclaiming ownership of the game they had originally delivered to the world.

And yet for all their native talent and diversity, their skills, tactics and management owed much to the pervasive foreign influence that came to characterise English football at club level in the Premier League. It is worth noting here, perhaps, on a point of etymology, that the word 'premier', far from being Anglo-Saxon, is French or Norman in its origin, denoting quality of the higher order, or as the Romans used to say: '*primarius*', of the first rank; chief, principal; excellent.

If, today, many foreigners as well as Englishmen follow the English Premier League more than *La Liga*, it is because English football has become an alternative history of modern England: a mid-sized nation that has successfully re-invented itself, with its identity moulded by history but capable of evolution, with its strengths and idiosyncrasies and a peculiar relationship with money and how to make best use of it, producing football of real quality as well as entertainment value, with clubs supported by passionate fans.