

The Study of Business and Football: an overview of the nature of the literature

by Bob Perry

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Abstract

I have recently completed a management-orientated research project in the study field of football. Several students have asked me to suggest helpful academic sources. This occasional paper is a direct response to these enquiries and aims to assist any Business School students undertaking football-related dissertations and projects. Although some aspects of the game are well served by literature for other topics there are “black holes”: not least in the area of management and business. This paper provides some guidance in this respect and classifies the nature and content of key academic and other contributions. It also explains how non-academic literature could be utilised. Finally, appendices list useful points of enquiry and an extended bibliography.

The author

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Bob Perry is a Principal Lecturer, Academic Development for the Strategy and Entrepreneurship Department of Wolverhampton Business School. A lifelong football supporter, he has recently completed a five year study into the role and characteristics of English football managers.

The Study of Business and Football: an overview of the nature of the literature

Past academic attention

The first point to note about football-related research is that it is only a relatively recent development (Dunning 1975). Russell (1996:1) straightforwardly records that the academic community completely ignored football before the 1970s, “*the game’s lack of social cachet denying it a literature of similar size to that enjoyed by cricket*”. The farsighted Sir Norman Chester is football’s first and so far most celebrated academic. In 1968, he received the first substantive Government commission to report on football generally and its impact on spectators specifically. Rippon (1983) notes that his findings were largely ignored; further, a subsequent enquiry by him on behalf of the Football League in 1983 received only lukewarm approval. He died in 1986, lending his name to the *Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research*, which forms part of Leicester University’s Department of Sociology and receives funding from the Football Trust.

Despite the official reactions to Chester’s endeavours, the Centre’s establishment indicated that football was at last being taken seriously. Since this time it has become the hub of most academic research and publication, the majority centred on crowd disorder and supporter psychology. *The roots of soccer hooliganism, an historical and sociological study* (Dunning, Murphy and Williams 1988), and *Hooligans Abroad* (Williams, Dunning and Murphy, 1984) were not only seminal works but also illustrated the early research subject matter emanating from the Centre. Currently, Leicester University continues to provide the main critical mass of research output. Therefore students serious about football related research would be well advised to contact the Centre as a starting point (see Appendix A).

Away from the Leicester cadre, other pioneering contributions are worthy of mention. Work from the University of Birmingham by Clarke (1973) and Critcher (1973, 1974, 1979) represented (at the time) contemporary cultural studies. Further, the case study approach was used by psychologist Peter Marsh (especially in Marsh *et al.* 1978) in a truly “heavyweight” attempt to understand life and violence on the terraces.

If these works are now a little dated, James Walvin’s social history essays provide a useful temporal background to football (1975, 1986). More recently, efforts such as Dave Russell’s *Football and the English* (1996) demonstrated a continuation of the historian’s craft to weld a variety of sources into a panoramic view of the game that has been a “*feature of English life since late last century*”. The backgrounds offered by these and other writers are helpful in understanding where the game has come from, and by implication provide a context for any new study.

Recent developments have included the establishment of research focused football centres at both Preston and Liverpool (see Appendix A) and it is likely that future further academic publications will come “on stream”. In summary however, the main subject matter until recently has been concerned with either the history of the game or crowd disorder.

Other past academic contributions

There have in addition been a few less mainstream offerings over the past three decades. Alternative Marxist perspectives were prominent in the work of both Ian Taylor (1971) and the translated works of German political theorist Gerhard Vinnai (1973). Perhaps the most famous “one off” was that of zoologist and “student of human behaviour” Desmond Morris’ *Soccer Tribe* (1981) which claimed to “*change the way you see the game*”, and certainly his was a unique contribution. Despite wide popular acclaim, some would consider this to be serious academic literature.

Morris's (1981) study undeniably represented a highly distinctive and provocative view of the game, claiming to draw upon the disciplines of both anthropology and behavioural psychology. The work was underpinned by both secondary and primary research and the author's position as a director (of Oxford United) and a research fellow offered potential for unique insights. The premise of the text is the claim that each club was organised like a small tribe. Hence, the publication was structured by topics like tribal roots, rituals, heroes, trappings, elders, followers and tongue. Given that the whole game was dealt with in 44 chapters, for the essay's cohesion all aspects of football needed to "fit" this analogy. Morris' tendency therefore was to overstate a point to underline his "tribal" observations, regrettably "shoe horning" reality at times into a predetermined shape. For instance in emphasising football's significance as more than just a game he isolated certain "faces" including: a ritual hunt, a stylised battle, a status display, and a religious ceremony.

Although in football there are potentially aspects of each, on closer examination his fuller explanations appear rather outlandish¹. My major criticism is that the tribe explanation was too "tight" with everything corresponding uncomfortably well. I am not suggesting however the work is worthless; more this was a provocative, colourful text capable of challenging viewpoints and stimulating new ideas. Some of the theories were by implication more impressionistic than strictly accurate representations of the world of football. A lesson for the researcher is not to take *apparently* academic offerings at face value. Recently on a similar theme, psychologist George Sik (1996) attempted analysis football managers was written in a popular style from a supporter's rather than a researcher's perspective.

Academic work and the "business" of football

Although academic business-related football literature is sparse, the indications are that this is changing with increasing attention reflected in more recent management and business journals and books. Students may have noticed for instance that the most recent standard strategy texts draw on case study illustrations of Manchester United plc and Newcastle United to draw wider organisational lessons. Likewise, in the area of organisational behaviour (Gowler *et al.* 1993) Woodward offered a study centred on Fulham Football Club. In it he analysed SB Properties as owners of both Fulham and neighbouring Queens Park Rangers. Announcing plans to merge the clubs, the company faced opposition from all quarters, including the press, the local Member of Parliament, the Football League, the local council and even their own employees. Woodward used the blocking of the merger to highlight the power of organisational stakeholders over that of the "legal" owners.

In one text dealing with organisational development through metaphorical explorations a chapter was devoted to *English football as a metaphor for Organisational Change* (Currie and Kerrin 1996). Issues such as foreign influences on working practices, flexible working systems and interchangeable work roles were profiled, providing a worthwhile analysis underlining the value of what others can learn from football. Human Resource Management (HRM) specialists may also have noted the contributions of Taylor and Ward (1997) who provided insights into clubs and personnel issues and the consequent potential for learning from football.

Apart from strategy and HRM, marketing is also a potentially fruitful topic, but as yet it remains under-exploited by academics. One notable exception is Meredith's (1994) account of Leicester

¹ Taking by way of example, the first of these: the hunt. Morris explains the game as a proxy for spectators whose emotional releases are satisfied by a hunt (in the form of a match) with the goal as the prey and the ball as the weapon. It is unlikely that anyone who has attended a match would seriously concur with such an analysis! As a supporter myself I fail to relate to such an explanation: if it is a "hunt" why is the prey always visible and obvious? What role does a referee play in a "hunt"? If we do hunt by proxy through football, why does the opposition simultaneously hunt us? If the ball is a weapon why does a side endeavour to keep it? If the goal is the prey why is it not destroyed? Why do we "swop" prey at half time? Morris' ideas seem to reflect an ill thought out analogy designed to explain the (then) tribe-like behaviour of the hooligan football fringe.

City's repackaging of reserve games, which made for an interesting study of novel approaches to marketing the game.

In terms of the perhaps harder-edged subjects of economics and accountancy, the University of Aberdeen in the early 1980s produced several discussion papers into issues such as demand- and price-setting (Cairns 1983). More recently, the journal *New Economy* devoted an edition to football while the *Journal for the Institute of Economic Affairs* included a similar number specifically football related articles in an edition dealing with the economics of sport. Comparative business ratio analysis began to appear in the mid 1980s before the advent of the more substantial annual *Deloitte and Touche* (previously *Touche Ross*) Survey of Football Club accounts (see Appendix A).

Other thinkers are increasingly sourcing from football to serve wider management learning. One example is that of quality management experts Ho and Galloway (1996) who advocated the use of Deming's system of profound knowledge to analyse and solve problems. Using as context the issue of identifying why England lost a game on penalty shoot-outs, they concluded that this method of analysis showed the errors made, their causes and future remedies available. In this "shoot-out" instance they suggested that players needed to be trained to adhere strictly to pre-specified coaching rules in the taking of successful penalties.

Using non-academic sources in research studies?

If football-related academic contributions generally and business studies specifically are not great, there are many written sources dealing with all aspects of football. To appreciate this breadth Seddon's *Football Compendium* (1995) provides a good vantage point, containing a listing of over 5,000 books and other printed publications. Approximately a third of these are concerned with either the history of the game or club histories: a combined effort of academics, enthusiasts, and authors of all kinds. Apart from those dealing with historical perspectives, few offer real academic rigour. Overwhelming the work is aimed predominantly at a popular rather than academic readership, hence having an orientation to entertainment rather than intellectual edification. Indeed, when I initially researched the area I was struck by an absence of the "right" type of material. Dunphy commented on the poor quality of many works, concluding that "*most football books should never be published*". Conversely, Russell (1997:2) acknowledged a presence of serious football literature "from outside the academic establishment by writers and journalists such as Simon Inglis and John Harding". This left me with something of a dilemma: how did I treat this non-academic literature, some of which appeared to be of a good quality? In differentiating their relative approaches, Reason and Rowan (1981) concluded that researchers tend to interview, theorise and feedback several times whereas journalists and the like may "go round the block" once, rendering their work potentially valid but less rigorous. Directly the question arises as to whether a serious researcher can credibly use these non-academic contributions, and if so in what ways?

Stephen Wagg apparently confronted a similar situation when he suggested that the football books he was faced with represented predominantly personal accounts. In Wagg's (1984: xiii) opinion they were nevertheless potentially useful; "they don't analyse the football world - they only provide some of the raw material for doing so". My view is that to ignore the popular literature completely would in all cases be inappropriate. At the same time, there must caution: any conclusions suggested by these sources are not founded upon sound methodological approaches. In my own research I utilised non-academic sources as a valuable way of building an overall appreciation of the subject matter. The scholarly account of *League Football and the men who made it: Official Centenary History of the Football League* (Inglis, 1988) for instance was useful in determining the chronology of developments within the game. Additionally I used non-academic literature as a form of "in-fill" around academic sources.

The nature of other literature

The breadth of non-academic literature is wide, and can be best appreciated in terms of five categories, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. ‘Non academic’ Football Literature, and other sources

Category 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • technical /industry publications
Category 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • newspapers and sports papers • magazines
Category 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • official match programmes, magazines, the internet official sites, other club promotions • club videos
Category 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘fanzines’ (note 2) • the internet • television documentaries • other television and radio programmes
Category 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • other ‘popular’ texts

Source: Bob Perry, 1999

Technical or industry publications (category 1) represent official or semi-official documents emanating from individual clubs, professional organisations, or the Government. Annual financial reports, reports on behalf of the Professional Footballers’ Association or the League Managers’ association, and Government commissioned publications such as the Taylor Report (1990) into the Hillsborough stadium disaster, can all potentially have a role to play.

As for category 2 sources, there can be some excellent contributions by journalists in (mainly) broadsheet newspapers. Football’s recent popularity has also seen a mushrooming of new or re-launched quality, glossy magazine titles, such as *Goal*, *90 minutes*, *Total Football*, *Match of the Day*, and *Fourfourtwo*. These publications seem to reflect a buoyant attitude that is generally sympathetic to issues such as mechanising, all seater stadia, mass television coverage, and a general “gentrification” of the game. Such titles currently exist alongside the longer established, earthier publication *When Saturday Comes* which presents a more cynical perspective.

Category 3 includes “club-approved” literature such as club histories, some in written, others in video form. Official match day programmes can contain a wealth of historical detail about individual clubs and the game itself. These sources can be particularly helpful when constructing club case studies.

Category 4 “unendorsed” or literature that is more independent and other source material can also be potentially useful. This includes so-called “fanzines”², cheaply produced publications by supporters for supporters (Shaw 1989). There are literally hundreds of titles. With the growth in the popularity of the World Wide Web it is inevitable that they are also readily accessible in this medium, generally club specific, and maintained by the enthusiasm of supporters. The exploitation of football’s popularity by television programme makers can offer additional source material³.

² The term was first coined in America as a contraction of “fan magazine” for the devoted science-fiction fans. It was transported to Britain with the punk music movement in the mid 1970s with a new wave backlash to the existing music press of the day before taking root within football. Early efforts were *City Gent* (Bradford City) and *Terrace Talk* (York City) but one of the most influential was the non-club specific *Off the Ball* and *When Saturday Comes*.

³ Examples include:

- *Kicking and Screaming*. BBC 2 weekly series. Shown during 1996
- *Filthy rich*. Channel 4. Shown 1996
- *Out of the blue* Central TV May 1996
- *Fair game : Hold the back page*. Yorkshire TV for Channel 4. 1996

'Popular' texts and sources

Those sources that comprise the final category can in themselves be diverse and take the form of a diary style, "fly on the wall" accounts, "personality" titles, or other oddity texts. I now indicate the breadth of this work and its particular relevance to the study I undertook. Possibly the most well known of the diary-type efforts was Nick Hornby's (1992) innovative *Fever Pitch*, which received much critical acclaim, becoming a best selling title and subsequently a successful film. Hornby's approach struck a chord as to how a football supporter's life is ordered around *his* team, which the author uses as frames for anecdotes and events in his life. Within my own study it was only of marginal value but confirmed my own feelings as a supporter as not abnormal (I had the unnerving experience of "recognising" myself throughout the work!)

Eamon Dunphy's (1986) "*Only a game*" represented a player's view through diary entries of a troubled season. Although the original work was over twenty years old, I was struck by its fluent writing style, rich in tortured introspection and illuminating insight into a player's thinking. A more contemporary view was reflected by Pat Nevin (Nevin and Sik 1997). I also found the diary of Graham Turner (1989) to be helpful in grasping the demands of the manager's job (he drives 40,000 miles a year on business) and appreciating issues from his perspective. More recently, Alex Ferguson's (1995) diary, though better crafted than most, offered few real insights.

In terms of "the fly on the wall" style material, Davies' (1985) subject of Tottenham Hotspur broke new ground. Based upon the author's unlimited access during the 1971/72 season, it represented a first insider view of the operation of a football club. This approach became a prototype for similar television documentaries such as the Graham Taylor *Impossible job* feature.

Over 500 individual biographies and autobiographies (personality titles) exist, which appear to have grown in popularity soon after the Second World War (Seddon 1995). Players and managers alike are featured, however the majority of texts are more entertaining than informative. The *Sunday Times* once referred to the football memoir as "a literary form that ranks at least two grades below the trashiest airport novel" (English 1998), and some are undeniably weak efforts likely to have been "ghosted" and aimed at making a "quick buck". Others have gained wider public acknowledgement due to their controversial nature. Len Shackleton's memoirs for instance are legendary for a single blank page headed "the average director's knowledge of football", whereas there was a certain notoriety concerning the exploits of Frank Worthington (1994), less footballing, more amorous. John Hendrie's autobiography (1998) has value in that it underlines the distinctiveness of the football world, for instance the operation of an apprenticeship system akin to the public school "fagging" system. Apparently, arguments with managers and players, drinking, fighting, infidelity, gambling, puerile practical jokes and bullying are everyday realities. In terms of providing context to the environment, Fred Eyre's (1981) sensitive and self deprecating account of an ordinary player rejected by a "big" club and Gary Nelson's (1996) journeyman's tale and progression into management have roles to play. Both reflect an earthy reality and genuine insight into player motivations and attitudes.

A number of oddity titles exist that can provide different and interesting insights into football. For instance, a co-authored effort by Titford and Dunphy (1992) looked at a season through the separate perspectives of player and supporter. Such thinking provided for a multi dimensional attitude to an individual club: the basis of producing a research case study. Phil Shaw's fanzine compilation (1989) *Who's game is it anyway?* gave an overview of the history and development of fanzines as well as extracts from them: "prima facie" reflections on what the supporter feels.

• *A year in the life of Paul Gascoigne*. Channel 4/ Cutting Edge, 1996
Premiership Passions. BBC 1 series. Shown during 1998

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to provide some straightforward guidance for the would-be football researcher. In so doing, it is hoped that much time will be saved in researching and cutting through the jungle of publications, both academic and popular. The recent heightened interest in football has already begun to permeate business school thinking. (It is inevitable perhaps that this should be the case, money in the game has attracted business, and business attracts management theorists). As indicated earlier this has covered a diversity of topics including marketing, organisational behaviour and human resource management, organisational development, finance and economics, and total quality management. If this paper can help inspire and give confidence to students to add to this output I will be highly satisfied.

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Appendix A – Some useful information

A key centre for football research is:

Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research
University of Leicester
Department of Sociology
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
Tel: 0116 2522522
<http://www.le.ac.uk/snccfr/>

The Centre has since 1987 been active in researching a wide range of football-related topics. Easy access to some of the Centre's resources including a list of the Centre's available publications, and a fact sheet is available on-line

The following offers great potential particularly on historical issues and those reflecting social, economic and cultural dimensions:

Institute of Football Studies
University of Central Lancashire
Preston PR1 2HE
Tel: 01772 893057
<http://www.uclan.ac.uk>

The Institute of is a joint venture between the University and the Football Museum currently being established at Preston North End's Deepdale Stadium.

The Football Research Unit
School of History
University of Liverpool
8-10 Abercromby Square
Liverpool L69 3BX
Tel: 0151 794 2401
<http://fru.merseyside.org/>

This Unit was established in 1994 with the aim of conducting “*serious academic research into the social, economic, historical, cultural and political aspects of football, both in the UK and abroad*”.

The following provides an excellent catalogue of material to 1995:

Seddon P. J. (1995) *A Football Compendium. A Comprehensive guide to the literature of Association Football* The British Library

For those with an interest in finance, the *Deloitte and Touche Annual review of Football Finance* is of great significance. This is available from:

Deloitte & Touche
201 Deansgate
Manchester M60 2AT
Telephone: 0161 832 3555

This publication has in the past been made available to students without charge .

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