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Object, Legitimacy and Inability: Reflections on 100 Years of Footballing Nothingness

Gary Armstrong & Matthew Bell

This paper focuses on a 100-year period in the near-140-year history of Sheffield United Football Club (nicknamed 'the Blades'), founded in 1889 in the city where the game of Association Football ('football') was begun, and which hosts the 1857-founded Sheffield FC, the world's oldest football club. Since its beginnings and an ensuing successful first 35 years, Sheffield United FC (SUFC) has been unable to win a major domestic trophy over the past 100 years and concomitantly has never qualified to compete for one of the three trophies available in UEFA-regulated European competitions. In that same time 43 English clubs have won one of the three trophies, and more have played in the European competitions. Nevertheless, the Blades have sustained a loyal fanbase of some 30,000 who attend home games, mostly drawn from a city population of 556,500 (2021 Census) and a regional conurbation of around 1.5 million, who hope that their team might, in their lifetime, lift a trophy. For the past 100 years other clubs with less history and from smaller demographics and indeed with lesser economic facilities have achieved what SUFC have not, i.e. win a trophy. When considering the club's history, the size of both the fanbase and the city-wide demography, such a victory would free the club of the current unwanted accolade of being the most under-achieving in world football (in the authors' opinion). The authors – both Sheffield born and raised and lifelong Blades fans – attempt herein to provide a dispassionate analysis of this footballing institution. We feel it pertinent to ask as to why SUFC have proven unable to accomplish the most crucial element of what it was established to do. We wonder what stories does SUFC tell the curious primarily about the governance of a football club but also of the city whose name it carries? Where, we might ask, stand issues of trust in these processes and which, do Blades fans agree, are legitimate by way of excuses for not winning trophies?

Place and Object

The main purpose of SUFC since its inception 135 years ago was to remain in business (and thus financially viable) and ideally attain a degree of sporting success. The former has been commendably attained, albeit over the past 30 years the club has on a few occasions been on the brink of financial disaster. The latter was once a fairly regular occurrence – but not over the past 100 years. Until 1925 SUFC were a successful football club. Entering the second tier of England's recently established Football League in 1892 the club was promoted to the top tier in 1893, where they were to remain until 1934. In this era the club was both profitable and capable of winning the top division's championship – albeit just the once – in 1898 and the FA Cup in 1899, 1902, 1915 and 1925. At the turn of the century Sheffield United FC might have claimed to be the best team in the world; that was before the world began playing football but a plausible claim nonetheless following their defeat of Glasgow Celtic in 1898 in the then annual contest between the champions of the Scottish and English Leagues, when the winners could claim the status of 'Champions of Britain' and implicitly that of the best football team in the world.

Little to excite the fans has happened over the past 100 years. Runners-up in the 1936 FA Cup final, the Blades have never made a Wembley cup final since. What success the club has since had is modest; they were to win the unrecognised Football League North in 1946 and were Second Division champions in 1953. Fourth Division champions in 1982, the Blades then won the League One (England's third tier) championship in 2017. If we seek a headline, we can state that the club averaged a cup semi-final around every 15 years. Taking comfort where it can be found, the Blades can claim to be one of just five clubs in English footballing history to have won all four professional leagues and in December 2023 celebrated their 5,000th league game and 2,500th game played at its Bramall Lane stadium. The club has a great history if we consider its first 36 years, but a rather more modest history in the ensuing 100.

Since the late 1930s the club has suffered a somewhat tumultuous trajectory in the English League system. Unlucky in finding itself top of the First Division when World War 2 broke out in 1939 (and the league was suspended for the next seven years), the post-war years saw them play five seasons in England's top division before relegation. Promotion in 1953 produced three more seasons back in the top-flight before relegation in 1956, then a few seasons in Division Two before promotion again in 1961. The club was relegated in 1968, promoted in 1971 and relegated again in 1976. In these decades the club has been briefly top of Division One (in 1971). A calamitous decline in 1979 saw the club in the third tier of English football for the first time in its history. Things got worse and the club entered the fourth tier in 1981. The club evidenced a journey unprecedented in English football as they went from Division One to Division Four in six years and then from Division Four back to Division One in eight years, cumulatively providing for a record 14-year journey of 1-4-1 (1976-1990).

There have been glimpses of potential footballing glory over the past 30 years. Appearances in the FA Cup semi-finals in 1993, 1998, 2003, 2014 and 2023 and League Cup semi-finals in 2003 and 2015 made for a sense of anticipation for the Blades' fanbase. One recent epoch made fans consider that there were great days ahead. In 2020 the Blades finished ninth in the English Premier League (EPL) – their highest league position for 45 years. This was not to be sustained and the following year the club carried the accolade of being one of the worst teams in the history of the EPL when attaining relegation having accumulated just 23 points. There was some comfort in the fact that 17 defeats in that season were by just a one-goal margin. A return to the EPL in 2023 was not what it might have been; the team currently sits bottom with just 16 points from its 30 games. The club looks on target to concede the greatest number of goals in the history of the EPL. There is, a reader will agree, considerable room for improvement in this proud and world-renowned city.

Purpose and Prospects

The city the Blades were founded in carries two remarkable claims to genius; citizens of the city invented stainless steel and were instrumental in establishing the rules of Association Football. Sheffield can thus claim to have changed the world in any number of ways.¹

The global idiom that football was to become derived from very basic ambitions and the humblest of technologies. From its inception the game named 'football' required spaces to facilitate it. A flattish patch of grass just outside the town centre of Sheffield in the mid 19th century became a renowned space in the history of the global game. Preceding football in this location were the sports of cricket and pedestrianism, practices that required qualities of technical *finesse* and teamwork in the former, and individual endurance in the latter. Somewhere in the middle of these qualities appeared football with the creation in 1857 of Sheffield FC. Football began to be played at Bramall Lane in late 1862. The Bramall Lane enclosure (a wall surrounded the playing fields) carried the purpose of promoting both rational and useful recreation and a concomitant opportunity for spectators to admire male athletic ability and endurance (see Bell & Armstrong 2014). When the stadium began hosting football it was to acquire geometric white lines and two sets of goalposts to regulate the task of the two football teams as they sought to both score and then defend that lead. Partisan crowds soon followed as the working classes of this proletarian city were to colonise the spaces the game was performed in, albeit the event always attracted a section of the middle classes.

Football was also to attract men who sought to make money, both by playing the game and administering it. The Wednesday Football Club (which in 1929 became officially known as Sheffield Wednesday FC) was founded in 1867 as an offshoot of a cricket club founded as early as 1820 by local market traders whose day off gave the club its name.² Nine years later The Wednesday became the first English club to pay a player to play football. This was Scotsman James Lang. The arrival of professionalism served to further bolster the game's appeal; the public could observe an increasingly competitive sport that was now more than simple entertainment. Healthy – and talented – young men now had the opportunity to use the game to make a living away from what had previously awaited them: the rigours and inherent dangers of the coal mines or the steel-producing factories that Sheffield's economy was built upon.³

1 Stainless steel was invented by Sheffield-born metallurgist Harry Brearley (1871-1948). In 1908 two of Sheffield's principal steelmaking companies, John Brown and Co. and Thomas Firth and Sons, jointly financed a research facility called Brown Firth Laboratories, headed by Brearley, who experimented with adding chromium to carbon steel to raise its melting point with the aim of reducing gun barrel wear. Brearley etched experimental samples using a dilute solution of nitric acid in alcohol, and thus found – by accident – that his chromium steels were resistant to chemical attack. Originally calling it 'rustless steel', Brearley saw its potential for cutlery rather than weapons. The announcement of the invention of what was to become known as stainless steel was made in the *New York Times* of January 31st 2015.

2 The Wednesday's 1820 foundation means the club can lay claim to be the oldest extant sports entity in the world.

3 The emerging football teams at one time shared the space of Bramall Lane. The Wednesday played their more important matches there but when in 1887 the club moved to a new purpose-built ground a quarter of a mile away from Bramall Lane at Olive Grove, Heeley, the resulting loss of income impacted the Sheffield United Ground Committee, which operated the Bramall Lane arena. The committee needed a replacement attraction; the idea was therefore seeded for a new – professional – football club to be based at the ground. As football

Income streams provided for the formation of the Blades. All four of the 1889 FA Cup's semi-finalists were clubs based in England's northern and midland towns. The games regulatory body the Football Association (FA) selected Bramall Lane to host the Preston North End v West Bromwich Albion tie. Despite there being no local team involved, the attendance of 22,688 was the then largest ever for an FA Cup semi-final. The receipts of £558 1s – worth about £63,000 in 2025 – were eye-opening for the era. The day was a huge financial success and was the catalyst for Bramall Lane committee member Charles Stokes to urge his colleagues to consider the formation of a new professional club to play at Bramall Lane. Thus, in March 1889 were founded Sheffield United FC.

The Object of the Game

A shared enthusiasm required an object to facilitate the abstract pursuit of regular collegiality. This was provided in the shape of a football. A product of 32 pieces of leather and stitching and the capture of the air that inflated it made for a useful object. French anthropologist Bruno Latour (1997) considered the importance of the object – in this instance the football – and argued that any object on its own does not carry intentions, albeit we might consider that a football is ever-tempting of the human instinct to kick it. What interested Latour was variously; what meaning objects might carry, what networks they facilitated, and what processes might arise therein. Elaborating on his own questions Latour argued that the object provides at the most obvious level for social networks; the football created the associationism that defined football clubs, from which was created a greater stage for cross-club social interaction. In facilitating such human agency Latour accepted the object may inadvertently change perceptions and behaviours because objects can be signals and 'work' because thousands of people enter the public realm to declare their identification with them. The object (i.e. the ball) can also come to represent ideas and meanings; the object creates empathies and carries agency be it for the individual, the crowd and the city. The object gave birth to football fandom. The object provided for a global idiom.

Football clubs exemplify the very human quest for community, even those that don't win trophies (Nisbet 1953). Essentially the pursuit of emotional participatory encounters, football fandom is enacted most obviously in the public drama of the football match, which holds a significance far beyond the scheduled 90-minute duration. Typified by proclamations and – ideally – celebrations, the football match provides the occasion to gaze on a contest – essentially a variety of individual performances – which, whilst ever-enchanted, offers also endless opportunities for the partisan to enjoy other people's humiliation. A socio-sensory experience integral to place branding and all that encompassed by the term 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore 1999), the football match is both a celebration and an expression of citizen participation par excellence. Having chosen a football club, the enthusiast is supposed to remain with it for life. Despite the absence of footballing glory, the fanbase of

attendances continued to grow, the Bramall Lane amenities – a large and relatively good playing surface, excellent facilities for players, officials and the public, and a high perimeter wall to prevent spectators gaining entry without paying – had already caught the eye of the Football Association – as the national governing body sought venues for its FA Cup semi-finals involving provincial teams.

many a club can remain passionately loyal. If unhappy with the club's way of playing or lack of success there is – we sense – not that much a fan can do about it. Changing football allegiances is not a quality admired in a person. Fandom carries hope as its disposition (cf Hage 2003). Fandom also celebrates loyalty in adversity. We might also consider what Dr Faustus realised centuries ago when exploring the relationship between the pursuit of desire and ethical living, namely that misery loves company.⁴

Systems and Governance

The accolade of being England's (and perhaps the world's) greatest football non-achievers facilitates debates around variously; the competence of a football club's management and governance, the ability of its player recruitment processes, the efficacy – or otherwise – of the club's formal and informal ways of being and doing and at times – we suggest – questions the competence of those tasked with municipal politics in that – we might ask – does the a football club say something about the town/city in which it exists? (Pardo & Prato 2011, 2019). If we take the first issue we can state that the most fundamental success in the existence of a football club is winning the game it plays. That is the ambition of all who play the game, but as all concerned recognise, that success is elusive; the opposition have exactly the same ambition. Football is thus forever controversial and thoughtful, success requires tactics and the game has always celebrated its own concepts of 'science' as its practices construct, contest and confront truths about people and places (cf Comaroff & Comaroff 2016). The efficacy of any system of play and indeed coaching and management is considered self-evident in football if the matchday outcome is a victory. However, what precisely constitutes that winning system is never easily articulated, neither can answers be readily provided to questions as to variously; who devised the system? what inspirations built it? and what personnel can claim to have overseen its implementation? Success has many parents, failure in football is rarely owned, or admitted to.

But non-achievement may not always be equated with failure. We might consider thus not only what a club has not achieved but what the one-time successful clubs have not been able to sustain. All football clubs seek the ability to score more goals than the opponents; winning enough games wins trophies. This sounds simple; as any fan will tell the curious, the game carries a host of intangibles. These occasionally reveal wider truths most evident in team performances; the league table does not lie at the end of the season, albeit victory in just six matches can win one of the two knock-out cup competitions. When success is attained claims can be made to it being the outcome of the implementation of a system. All clubs have trophy cabinets; those that reveal very little silverware provoke suggestions that their system is not working. Winning however can be controversial. The best team does not always win the fixture and notions of injustice and luck enter debates. Winning though is not *everything* in football; how a team wins their football fixtures is for some fans a crucial issue; others care not and are happy to bask in the glory of winning however it is achieved.

⁴ This phrase was originally used in the 16th century by the demon Mephistophilis in Christopher Marlowe's play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*.

A pertinent issue will always be the governance of a football club. Modes of being inform notions of governance, which raise the question as to what the club sells itself as. Do all football clubs have a Unique selling Point (USP)?, what is a club's reputation attained and sustained and what does the wider footballing world think of it? This raises the multi-level of governance that typifies any football club. There are laws of the game but little around how football clubs – even elite ones – should ideally be governed. Historically the game at club level has no clearly defined and discernible culture of leadership. As a consequence SUFC and the various other clubs that have constituted the 92 clubs that made up the Football League and later the EPL ran – and still run – their clubs as they see fit. Consequently, debates pertinent to that we can term morality forever surrounded football. The ideal way of being for most clubs for the best part of a century was to remain solvent and 'united', i.e. evidencing a unity of purpose from Chair to supporter and all in between. In the past 40 years or so fans of the English game forever speak of clubs utilising the binary of the well-run and its opposite, the chaotic-run evidencing boardroom schisms, ego-driven leadership and financial incompetence. On top of this arise issues of internal governance, notably rifts between directors and managers/coach, and dressing-room cliques. The game of football has no easy answers as to who decides what is legitimate in pursuit of its trophies and indeed what any claim around legitimacy should look like. Legitimacy is loaded with notions of inequality.

Fair Play; Fair Do's

Football is also loaded with Inequalities. The issues of winning trophies are essentially matters of legitimacy. Both a personal and institutional quality, legitimacy is inseparable from procedural issues in both politics and business. At its most basic, legitimacy combines personal credibility with public accountability (Pardo 2000). If we accept that governance is inseparable from power, the authority that accompanies the assumed sense of legitimacy ideally inspires trust (*ibid* 2009). The notion of trust is significant here at both the personal and institutional levels. Where, we need ask, is trust broken? and what needs to be evident for the onlookers to be infuriated or mistrusting enough to condemn and protest? Would trust in the club's governance compensate for the lack of footballing success? Interestingly we might consider also if trust can be overlooked if the governance produces outcomes that please? In football the intelligent are lauded, but the game also rewards the venal and the stupid. Do the ends – if that is a trophy – justify the means?

This has resonance for football. Historically in English football the size of the town's/city's population and implicitly the catchment areas for the capture of youth talent, the ability (and willingness) of the club to pay competitive wages and therefore induce player and managers to its employ, the attraction of the town the club is located in to potential players and their partners, the local availability of monies for both sponsorship and investment and the potential the club and town might hold for non-local investors who might seek a financial association. This ecological state of affairs was not obvious; big clubs did not win everything – but most of the time the little clubs were trailing behind.

Then came the turbo-capitalism in English football that arose from the 1992 creation of the EPL – of which SUFC were co-founders – which today evidences a league containing clubs

owned *de facto* by nations states, hedge funds and billionaires and reliant on the broadcasting monies of extra-terrestrial television and social media platforms for its sustenance. Attempts to rein in the ensuing financial recklessness began with the implementation of 'Financial Fair Play', later to be re-named 'Profit and Sustainability Rules'.⁵

Sheffield United are – and have been for the past 30 years – one of the EPL's poorer clubs and have in the past and today one of the lowest wage bills. These factors make the likelihood of it winning a trophy very remote. Who then in this reality do Blades fans hold to account and how? Can they blame it all on player recruitment? Team selection? Poor sponsorship deals? An incompetent board? No easy answer is available because football club governance is not formalised. In any dispute between board and manager or manager and player we thus can ask who might mediate and via what institutional mechanism? It might be useful at this moment to ask what Sheffield United stands for and is identified with. The club never had a stated value or brand until 1981,⁶ or for that matter never stated an explicit purpose. The club has no history of promulgating a playing or managerial policy.

If things on the pitch when not quite right then what could the fans do? A revolt of the partisan fan in the face of the aforementioned incompetencies – or failures if a reader prefers – has rarely been evident the history of SUFC. If fans did seek change in their club what cultural repertoires might they draw from? What were and are the platforms of mediation? The club might claim to have a 'relational economy' with those who populate the stadium on match day but such fans have no obvious system with which to negotiate with those who own the club; in short there is no formal infra-politics (Scott 1990). The discontented might suggest a counter-movement as an alternative to that in power but this is about dissatisfaction and not an attempt to take over the club governance. This indeed was evident around Sheffield United in 1986 when the first-ever collective instantaneous display of contempt for the Board of Directors took place after a home fixture and saw hundreds of fans chanting against the Board in the room above the car park. The informal tactic of collective vociferous opposition during or after the match is still the one most utilised, albeit such demonstrations are few and far between.⁷ Such protests were somewhat legitimised at the turn of the century by the SUFC Chairman, who to his credit was prepared to enter the various fracas and debate – publicly – with angry fans, with unwritten rules of decorum and conduct evident.

The more collected and remote might choose instead to write letters to the local print media or phone the local BBC radio station and speak on its one-hour duration early-evening phone-in agora termed *Football Heaven*, broadcast five evenings a week. For those who

5 Introduced by the Premier League in 2013, 'Profit and Sustainability Rules' (PSR) are the latest iteration of 'Financial Fair Play' (FFP) regulations. In simple terms, PSR allows clubs to lose £105 million over the course of three seasons, or £35 million per season on a rolling basis.

6 New chairman Reg Brealey coined the phrase 'The Family Club' to promulgate his desire that SUFC and Bramall Lane should be accessible and welcoming to people of all ages and gender.

7 Subsequent 'car park demonstrations' took place in 1991 (against the Board in the mistaken belief that striker Brian Deane had been sold); in 1994 (against chairman Reg Brealey); in 1998 and 1999 (against chairman/owner Mike McDonald); in 2008 (against manager Bryan Robson); and in 2011 (against the appointment of Danny Wilson as manager). There have been no such demonstrations since: the possible reasons for this are outside the scope of this paper.

sought more nuanced negotiations, the legitimate sites for debate were the Annual General Meeting and the meetings of the official supporters' club. However, these assemblies over the generations were never the forums for criticising the club, which was one of the reasons behind the 1994 formation of the Blades Independent Fans' Association (BIFA) by a small group of disaffected fans. This entity gained within a few months a membership of close to 1,750, had as one of its aims forcing chairman Reg Brealey into selling his shares in the club. When that objective was achieved in late 1995 BIFA sought dialogue with new owner Mike McDonald and his associates. This led to a short-lived irregular series of BIFA-instigated, club-facilitated 'fans' forums' at which club officials and/or managerial staff would take questions from Blades fans in a ticket-only audience. The meetings were usually moderated by Andy Pack, the club's media officer, and took place at a hired external hall or on club premises. This semi-formalised practice was discontinued post-1999 when McDonald himself became the subject of fan disfavour.⁸

Blades fans' direct debate with club officials remained dormant for some 25 years until in February 2024 the club – in line with the Premier League's new 'Fan Engagement Standard' – set up what it called the 'Fan Advisory Board' (FAB) comprising CEO Stephen Bettis, Head of Media Kevin Cookson, Supporter Liaison and Disability Access Manager Jon Helliwell and eight supporters. How the supporters were selected was not publicly disclosed, but they were represented by a spokesperson for Sheffield Sports Commentaries, the Chair of LGBT+ group 'Rainbow Blades', a Blades podcast host, the Chair of Sheffield United Disabled and Carers Association, the Chair of the Senior Blades organisation and three long-time season ticket holders. The FAB was to provide advice and support to the club's leadership in developing and delivering key projects pertaining to fan interests, such as: competition matters; enhancing the fan experience (physical and digital); stadium development projects; sustainability, corporate and social responsibility initiatives; improving fan products and services; football governance/heritage assets. The agreement was that all EPL clubs met with such organisations at least twice a season.

However, despite such sometimes ad-hoc arrangements there were never any real intermediaries between club and fans, but then again there are not simply two sides to the story. Fan Protest is usually inspired by injustice. But this asks; what is outrageous and unjust in the 100 years of non-achievement? Which asks us to consider where expectations arise from and furthermore provokes considerations around modest circumstance; is living within your means the price worth paying for winning nothing of note in football?

Legitimacy & Morality

Inequality affects politics (of all kinds) because the concept is integral to citizenship and justice. Wider historical and cultural traditions of scrutiny are thus relevant here . Our analysis is forced to consider the place that grew and sustained the football club for close to 140 years. We need consider the wider contexts of citizenship and explore what motivates

⁸ The first 'fans' forum' took place in February 1998, with SUFC chief executive Charles Green in attendance to answer questions. Others followed with Mike McDonald, club secretary John Thurman and manager Adrian Heath. Chairman Kevin McCabe briefly resurrected the process in 2009, by now organised and promoted by the club.

the citizens to collective action and the cultural logic utilised therein. But we might ask to whom is the institution of a football club relevant and why? Tied to this we ask in what ways and why the entity that is a football club is trusted by those who govern it?

Fans legitimate themselves by claiming ownership of the club; without them the club is nothing, they will reason. The ideas of 'being' that fans exist in and therefore considers them as legitimate is ever -wary of disjunctions between those who govern and manage and those who support. This brings in many ethical considerations; fans want their club to win trophies, but at what cost? We ask this because, we will argue, that which is moral is not always legitimate and that declared as legal is not always considered by all as legitimate.

How fans recognise, conceptualise and militate their concerns around legitimacy and governance interests us. This asks us to consider the levels of transparency around club governance and footballing business (implicitly legitimacy) and asks also what information is available to the curious and what is subsequently sought when that curiosity has been satisfied? Which brings in the more controversial and contentious issues around what fans consider as 'right' and 'fair', i.e. legitimate, in such matters. Enshrined in such questions is an acceptance that some matters around governance are unknowable; some details go to the grave, some remain undocumented, some monies will never all be accounted for and not all ways of being will be explainable. How all these issues combine collectively to attain footballing success or militate against that success is what we are attempting to consider. We would argue that in the world of professional football the legitimacy of those charged with the governance of a football club is judged not merely on success as measured by the trophy cabinet, but would be lauded as such.

Legitimacy had no formal channels. There was little that we might term a relationship of obligation between the club Board and the fans. The Board of Directors are generally admired for stepping up to govern the club and admired for variously; guaranteeing, loaning or donating and at times losing their own financial investment. Legitimacy in holding the position of club guardian is sometimes earned by virtue of being Sheffield-born and carrying the credential of being a lifelong fan. This actually has been a somewhat rare occurrence in the club's history.

With God's Help our Labour is Successful

The city inclines to the political left and has done since the electoral franchise was widened in 1918.⁹ Built on the collective efforts demanded in the heavy industries of steelmaking and coal mining, the populace has always valued in such labour trust and commitment – and effort – as much as achievement. The sub-heading above (*Deo Adjuvante Labor Proficit* in Latin) has been the motto of the city since 1875. We wonder whether the same can be said of the fans' attitude to its football teams. Never a rich city nor one attractive to the dilettante or the pretentious, Sheffield was a place that celebrated what it did and was

⁹ The Representation of the People Act 1918 (also called the Fourth Reform Act) was the final instrument that facilitated the eventual election of the Labour party in Sheffield. The Act extended the franchise to all men aged 21 and over, regardless of whether they owned property, and to women aged 30 and over. Thus a whole new electorate populated by the working classes was given the right to vote.

famous for and knew that by virtue of what it produced its name went around the world. The city did not need a football club to make its name known: it was a vital place in the history of trade unionism¹⁰ and was Britain's first Labour-controlled municipal council.¹¹ Independent and non-conformist, its once powerful Methodist lobby sought vainly for sobriety in the citizenry. This rubbed off on the club's first 35 years. The wayward affairs of some-football clubs even in these times were not features of the Sheffield United boardroom, as Charles Clegg¹² famously stated: "No one ever got lost on a straight road." Trust was integral to integrity.

Trust did not rely on formal political office. The governance of the city was not left totally to its elected members. At the local level the strong trade unions of the heavy industries that defined the city fought for the best deals for the workers it represented; arguments here were not sophistry, they were about existence and incomes that might even be said to influence life – and death, in fact. In our experience the citizens are irritated by those in political power but rarely irritated enough to get active. Quick to moan about its elected members as represented by political parties that constituted local municipal governance in the Town Hall, or those who returned to represent the city in Parliament, the citizenry were somewhat indifferent to act. What history of protest the city has manifested might hold resonance here. Allied to this we can consider the tactics of protest – both formal and informal – that can be utilised in seeking a change in outcome.

The citizens when irked can be formidable in the instances where legitimacy is questioned. At times the electorate have withdrawn from the processes of democracy in favour of direct action, which has seen in the late 19th century and 1920s public violence in the face of unemployment, famine, want and eviction.¹³ The electorate has for a century been solid Labour but not idealistic. In the 2020s it has protested against the ruling party by voting for

10 In 1858 Sheffield-born William Dronfield and his fellow print workers became involved in an industrial dispute with the owners of the *Sheffield Times* newspaper. In order to publicise their cause the printers formed the Sheffield Association of Organised Trades, of which Dronfield was secretary. Through this position he became involved in many national campaigns for workers' rights, and in 1866 helped found the United Kingdom Alliance of Organised Trades, which was the forerunner of the Trades Union Congress.

11 In the 1926 Sheffield City Council elections the Labour party won an outright majority under the slogan 'The will of the people must prevail'.

12 John Charles Clegg (known as Charles) and his brother William Edwin Clegg were the sons of William Johnson Clegg, three times Mayor of Sheffield and the city's first official receiver (appointed in 1883). The brothers both qualified as solicitors. They were also staunch Methodists. William was a Liberal councillor for 40 years and council leader for 24 of them. His career and profile was matched by Charles who, when asked about his hobbies, replied, "the furtherance of Temperance and football". Both Cleggs were talented athletes, captaining the two representative teams in the world's first floodlit football match, played at Bramall Lane in October 1878. When chosen to represent England against Scotland in the first-ever football international match in 1872, Charles Clegg was upset at being snubbed by his southern colleagues who considered themselves superior to this north-countryman. Clegg was to call some of them "snobs from the south who had no use for a lawyer from Sheffield". He became a director of both Sheffield United and The Wednesday and later was chairman and president of the Football Association. In 1927 Charles Clegg was knighted by King George V, thereby becoming the first person ever to be so honoured for services to football. He died in 1937.

13 <https://www.chrishobbs.com/sheffield/unemployedriots1922.htm>;
<http://www.chrishobbs.com/sheffield2/walkleyriot1922.htm>

other parties in sufficient numbers so that no single party had overall control, albeit Labour always won most seats. The rise of the Green party in the last decade is noteworthy.¹⁴

In a city noted for its associationism and friendliness, the people know that 'Good' does not always triumph over 'Bad' and that life can be harsh and outcomes unfair. The people have often lived with little monies in hard and at times in precarious work situations. If there were defining clichés to apply to the citizens they would probably include terms such as 'Don't make a fuss', preferring 'Nothing fancy' and meanwhile ever-willing to participate in self-denigration. They enjoy humour, particularly when holding a glass of beer. The question then is: has this affected expectations around football and has this in any way been part of the reason that SUFC are such footballing non-achievers? Just possibly the answer is that in a city in a region that considered industrial production as dangerous and at times precarious just maybe such citizens had more important things to put their time and efforts into than challenging the governance of something that was essentially a leisure pursuit that occupied half a day 40 weeks a year.

Whatever system is evident and practised at SUFC over the past 100 years might be said to be not working to maximum effect. Over the past 60 years nearly every one of the current top two division clubs have won one of the three trophies that define achievement in the English game; except Sheffield United. There is no obvious reason why footballing success has eluded the Blades for so long. A critic of our quest might ask if we have the formula to propose a redress to this situation. The answer is 'No' but in an attempt to do some justice to our question we feel a reader would be interested to consider the situation of title-winning clubs over the past five decades to ascertain what might lie behind their success, which by implication suggests the qualities and abilities that SUFC did not have at the same time. Those we shall study by comparison are: Ipswich Town in the early 1960s; Leeds United in the late 1960s and early 1970s; Derby County in the early and mid 1970s; Nottingham Forest in the late 1970s; Aston Villa in the early 1980s; Blackburn Rovers in the mid 1990s; Leicester City in the mid 2010s. We ask a simple question; what did they do that Sheffield United did not or could not?

Winning Teams

A note of cation might be useful at this point. In doing what was core business Sheffield United FC have never gone broke. Many other clubs have. One might argue thus that in comparison the governance of Sheffield United has been exemplary. Except for the very richest, sustained success for a football club is something not realisable. The issue of what monies to gamble on achieving football success brings in many considerations. To attain the ambition of winning a trophy, many English clubs over the past 30 years have spent monies they did not have in the hope that, at some future date, domestic trophies, Champions

¹⁴ The number of Sheffield City Council seats won by the four major parties (Labour, Conservative, Liberal/SDP/Lib Dem, Green) and the controlling party (NOC – no overall control) in the 2000s were: 2000 37, 1, 49, 0 (Lib); 2002 43, 2, 42, 0 (NOC); 2003 49, 1, 37, 0 (Lab); 2004 44, 2, 37, 1 (Lab); 2006 44, 2, 36, 2 (Lab); 2007 41, 1, 39, 2 (NOC); 2008 36, 0, 45, 3 (Lib); 2010 39, 0, 42, 2 (Lib); 2011 50, 0, 32, 2 (Lab); 2012 60, 0, 22, 2 (Lab); 2014 59, 0, 18, 4 (Lab); 2015 59, 0, 17, 4 (Lab); 2016 57, 0, 19, 4 (Lab); 2018 53, 0, 22, 6 (Lab); 2019 49, 0, 26, 8 (Lab); 2021 41, 1, 29, 13 (NOC); 2022 39, 1, 29, 14 (NOC); 2023 39, 1, 29, 14 (NOC).

League qualification and the accompanying television revenues would follow. This risky route to glory often failed, and as a result administration¹⁵ – and on the rare occasion extinction – followed. Current and former Premier League clubs Bradford City (three times), Middlesbrough, AFC Bournemouth (twice), Crystal Palace (twice), Luton Town (twice), Portsmouth (three times), Hull City, Queen's Park Rangers, Barnsley, Leicester City, Derby County, Ipswich Town, Wimbledon, Oldham Athletic, Leeds United, Southampton, Coventry City, Bolton Wanderers, Wigan Athletic and Derby County have all entered – and exited – administration since 1983, sometimes with the dissolution or liquidation of the parent company but no loss of league position. The only football penalty imposed is a points deduction, a sanction introduced in 2003 after Leicester City went into administration, cleared their debts and won promotion to the Premier League without any form of football punishment. Today the minimum deduction for administration is 12 points.

Administration however does not seriously affect most footballers, many of whom can move on to other clubs almost without hindrance. It is the non-football employees and business creditors who suffer, sometimes at the expense of their livelihoods. Sheffield United have never been in administration, albeit they have been close on at least a couple of occasions. This avoidance is to the credit of the various chairmen and owners, who despite their obvious faults have maintained a degree of equilibrium; the club's myriad internal disputes, accusations and recriminations over the past three decades and longer have never – somehow – placed Sheffield United at real risk of collapse. Somebody – often the United Chairman between 200x-2022 Kevin McCabe – always came to rescue the club financially.

Three of the aforementioned clubs won major trophies having exited administration: Leicester City won the Premier League title in 2015/16 and the FA Cup in 2021; Portsmouth won the FA Cup in 2008; Middlesbrough won the League Cup 2004. Others have reached cup finals and/or played in European competitions. Sheffield United have done none of those things; avoiding administration has therefore not done the club any good in terms of league position or trophy winning, or even a pan-European profile. In modern football, bad financial management thus does not preclude success, albeit it might prove painful and embarrassing in the short term. Sadly, prudent (or at least reasonable) financial management does not guarantee anything. This situation means that the same few clubs will always be challenging for honours, whereas the rest can only hope for the occasional cup final, European qualification or – in Leicester City's case – a season-long miracle (see below). This was not always the case over the past 60 years. At one time small clubs could win the league; why and how is explored in what follows.

Ipswich Town

Ipswich Town Football Club was formed in 1878 by the merger of Ipswich AFC and Ipswich Rugby Club. The new club competed in various East Anglian leagues until turning

¹⁵ Administration is the procedure in which a company that is, or is likely to become, insolvent is reorganised in an attempt to save it, or have its assets sold for the benefit of its creditors. The administrator must be a qualified insolvency practitioner, who can be appointed by the company's board of directors, its shareholders or an unpaid creditor (after a court application). The administrator takes control of the company away from the directors and legally assumes responsibility for its affairs.

professional in 1936 and joining the Southern League. After finishing first and second in their first two seasons, Ipswich were elected to the Football League in May 1938; they played in Division Three (South) until winning promotion to Division Two in 1954. Immediate relegation followed, but the club's fortunes were transformed by the appointment of 35-year-old Dagenham-born Alf Ramsey as manager in August 1955. Recently retired from a successful career as a right back with Southampton, Tottenham Hotspur and England, Ramsey proved an inspired choice by the club's board headed by the Cobbold family, which had been in the beer brewing trade since the early 1700s. Ramsey had no managerial and little coaching experience.

Unlike Ramsey, Ipswich Town did not have a great football pedigree but somehow the amalgamation of the metropolitan and the agrarian worked. Despite the club having little money, Ramsey led his new team to a third-place finish in Division Three. The following season they were promoted to Division Two as champions. Locally born forward Ted Phillips was the country's leading scorer with 42 league goals. For the next three seasons Ipswich consolidated as Ramsey improved his squad, so much so that in 1960/61 they won the Second Division title, a point ahead of Sheffield United. Ipswich centre forward Ray Crawford, signed from Portsmouth in 1958, was the division's leading scorer with 39 goals. Ramsey was innovative, his most notable idea being to move left-winger Jimmy Leadbetter into a left-midfield role, where he became the team's main playmaker. Opponents were unsure how to combat this novel tactic (sometimes referred to as 'false wingers'), as marking Leadbetter with the right back disrupted defensive formations.

Tipped by many in the press for immediate relegation in their first ever season in the top division, Ipswich confounded such predictions by becoming Football League champions. After a slow start they rose to challenge Burnley at the top; remaining undefeated in February and March, allied with Burnley's loss of form, Ipswich edged ahead, most notably with a 3-0 win at the once-mighty Arsenal. Town became a professional club. Their final game, a 2-0 victory over Aston Villa, gave them the title. Again Crawford – the only international in the side, with one cap – was prominent, with a league-leading 33 goals. It was the first time in history (other than the inaugural Football League season) that a club had won the title at its first attempt. The feat has not been accomplished since.

The Times reported Ipswich's triumph as: "Working on a shoestring, with a team virtually anonymous, they have taught the sophisticates of the game a lesson. Where others with their towering stands and money bags have sought to buy success, the men of Ipswich have gone quietly about their duty unattended by any mighty fanfares." Chairman John Cobbold – a nephew of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan no less – opined: "Cinderella has become a big girl." Meanwhile, the Ipswich board declined offers to play their following season's European Cup home games at Wembley or Highbury. "It would be like kicking our fans in the pants if we took these matches away from them," declared Ramsey. The then ramshackle and rusting Portman Road would remain "just as it is at the moment" added the manager. The Ipswich players would also remain the lowest paid in the First Division; whilst the big clubs were paying £80 or more per week, Ipswich were paying £30-£40. But as Ramsey – a man who had achieved so much "without raising his voice above a well-modulated whisper",

according to *The Times* – stated: “Who could work for a finer club than this? Money isn’t everything.”

Ipswich’s rise from Third Division South champions to First Division champions had taken just six seasons. However, their fall was even more rapid. The following October Ramsey agreed to take the England manager’s job – at which he did quite well – at the end of the season and, with their manager perhaps distracted, Ipswich faltered to a 17th-place finish. Without Ramsey they finished bottom in 1963/64, conceding 121 goals. The club was to rise again in the late 1960s, before enjoying a second golden period under another inspirational manager named Bobby Robson, winning the FA Cup in 1978 and the UEFA Cup in 1981. But despite challenging near the top of the league for several seasons, Robson was never able to emulate what Ramsey had done. Ipswich have not won the league since.

Leeds United

The club currently known as Leeds Rhinos was founded in 1870 as Leeds St John’s, maintaining this name until 1890 when it became part of the Leeds Cricket, Football and Athletic Co. Ltd, based at the new Headingley ground. The venue has been its home ever since. The club turned professional in 1895 as a result of the breakaway of the Northern Union (which later became the Rugby League) from the national (and amateur) Rugby Football Union. Association Football, meanwhile, was slow to catch on: the first such game in Leeds took place in 1877, ironically between two teams representing the Sheffield Football Association. After this the game stumbled along in the face of competition from rugby; in the 1880s and 1890s local clubs were formed and folded on a frequent basis. The most popular and enduring club of the period was Hunslet FC, which disbanded in 1902 when they lost the lease on their rented ground. Then, when Holbeck Rugby Club folded two years later their Elland Road ground became available. This was the catalyst for the formation of a new football club, Leeds City AFC, which took over the venue and played in the West Yorkshire League. At the time Leeds was the biggest city in England without a Football League club. This was to change in 1905 when Leeds City successfully applied to join the League. The club had a short and ultimately controversial lifespan, being expelled from the Football League when accused of making illegal payments to players during the First World War. They were thus forced out of existence in 1919.

A new club, Leeds United FC, was formed to replace them, and began in the Second Division in the 1920/21 season. Several promotions and relegations followed over the next 40 years before in March 1961 Middlesbrough-born Don Revie was appointed manager. Revie had joined Leeds as a player in 1958 following a successful career as a forward for Leicester City, Hull City, Manchester City and Sunderland. He also played six times for England. After flirting with relegation to the Third Division in 1962, Revie took Leeds to promotion to the First Division in 1963/64. This was to be the precursor to a decade of trophy-winning and near misses, comprising two First Division championships, one FA Cup win, one League Cup win, two Inter-Cities Fairs Cup wins and one Charity Shield win, plus three FA Cup final defeats, one Inter-Cities Fairs Cup final defeat, one European Cup Winners’ Cup final defeat and five second-place finishes in Division One.

The club's transformation under Revie was remarkable, maintaining such standards for so long even more so.. Revie was both a deep thinker and a forward thinker. As a player at Manchester City he perfected a role that became known as a 'deep-lying centre forward', based on the play of the great 1950s Hungarian Nándor Hidegkuti, who would drop deep to pull the opposing centre half out of position and create space behind him. Today this position might be called a 'false nine'. Such a playing background suggested Revie would one day make a good manager. Revie took over a squad riven with indiscipline, the epitome of which – perhaps surprisingly to a modern reader – was Jack Charlton.¹⁶ According to the website www.mightyleeds.co.uk, Charlton "demonstrated complete disrespect for both off-field authority and on-field discipline. He had long been a disruptive and difficult influence in the dressing room, embittered by managerial incompetence and fear of wasted potential." Charlton rebelled against one of Revie's early decisions, which was to equalise pay for all first-team players and instead offer performance incentives; previously players' wages had been based on seniority. Charlton was nearly sold to Manchester United as a consequence, but eventually differences were settled.

The club's culture was gradually changing for the better, thanks to Revie's insight and the philosophy of director Harry Reynolds, whose attitude was that if Leeds were going to be a top club they would do the things expected of a top club, such as staying at the best hotels. Revie was also to introduce dietary requirements for his players and brought ballet dancers to the club to teach balance and poise. His detailed dossiers on upcoming opponents, his bingo games and carpet bowls competitions in hotel corridors were to become legendary. The former was an example of his preparation and diligence, the games intended to formulate both team spirit and competitiveness. Another change was the team strip: Revie ditched the team's traditional blue and gold in favour of the all-white of the five-time European Cup winners Real Madrid, an indicator of Revie's lofty ambitions for his club. This was a move that might badly misfire; a stuttering start suggested this might be the case, but eventually it was to turn, thanks largely to a group of young players who came through together and would serve the club for many years. The eldest was Scotsman Billy Bremner, initially a right winger but later switched to midfield; coming through behind him were teenagers Gary Sprake, Jimmy Greenhoff, Paul Reaney, Paul Madeley, Norman Hunter, Terry Cooper, Peter Lorimer and Eddie Gray, all of whom would become major players for Leeds in the next decade.

Jettisoning no fewer than 27 players in his first two seasons in charge. He also demanded that his players be ruthless, both with the ball and without it, in a manner that would earn them the epithet 'Dirty Leeds'. Nevertheless, a team that was both skilful and uncompromising, as Leeds were, was hard to beat. Revie also made good signings. To him size did not matter; attitude and ability did. Thus the diminutive Bobby Collins, signed from Everton, and Johnny Giles, from Manchester United, joined the equally small and equally combative Bremner in midfield. At the back, the tough Gateshead-born Norman Hunter was

¹⁶ Jack Charlton played 629 times for Leeds United between 1952 and 1973. He made 35 appearances for England between 1965 and 1970, and was a member of the 1966 World Cup-winning team. He later managed Middlesbrough, Sheffield Wednesday, Newcastle United and the Republic of Ireland national team. He died in 2020, aged 85.

introduced alongside the reconciled Charlton, whose improved form saw him win his first England cap a month before his 30th birthday. Just over a year later he became a World Cup winner.

Success initially proved elusive. Throughout the mid 1960s Leeds kept coming close, finishing in the top four in the league several times and reaching four cup finals, winning two. League success escaped them until the £100,000 signing in 1967 of striker Mick Jones – from Sheffield United – helped get them over the line. A goalscorer of Jones' class was what the team had been lacking. In the 1968/69 season everything came together as Leeds won the league title with a record points total. The following summer Leeds signed another striker, Allan Clarke, from Leicester City, for £165,000. Jones and Clarke then formed one of the best striking partnerships in the English game, but league and cup success continued to be often just out of reach. One FA Cup win in 1972 could not make up for the three consecutive league runners-up positions and three cup final defeats that followed their league championship win.

Revie continued to be inventive. One day in March 1972 signalled the start of something that was to become another hallmark of the Leeds United of the era, and also the introduction a pre-match routine that was so novel it drew many column inches in the press, but has since become the norm at all levels of football. The occasion was an FA Cup quarter-final against Tottenham Hotspur at Elland Road, where the 43,000 crowd began streaming in two hours before kick-off. At 2.40pm they were to witness several firsts – the Leeds team came on to the pitch wearing personalised tracksuit tops with each player's name on the reverse, and numbered (and autographed) tags protruding from the tops of their socks. The resplendent players then embarked on an extended exhibition of callisthenics and their considerable football skills. This was revolutionary. The whole spectacle was a deliberately overt display of style and panache.

Writing in the *Yorkshire Post*, reporter Terry Brindle believed Revie had brought in such measures because he desired to improve the club's tarnished image: "Revie feels the time has come to bury, once and for all, Leeds United's lingering reputation as a 'method' side, a reputation which undervalues the extraordinary depth of individual talent at the club. For a long time Leeds United have been described as a team that works hard, that is well disciplined, that has a machine-like quality. What has been grossly underplayed is the tremendous individual ability in the side." Leeds even employed the visionary strategy of hiring a public relations expert named Paul Trevillion¹⁷ to improve the club's reputation.

The 1973/74 season was to be both the culmination of Revie's time at Leeds and the end of an era. Beginning the season with an English record 29 games undefeated, Leeds won the title by five points from Liverpool. Then, in the summer of 1974, Revie departed to succeed Alf Ramsey as manager of England. He had picked the right time to move on. His once-great Leeds team, growing old together, slipped to ninth the following season, and were relegated in 1981/82. Revie, meanwhile, struggled to adapt to international football and after three

¹⁷ Born in London in 1934, Trevillion is an acclaimed sports artist, illustrator and author who has produced artwork for hundreds of publications. He is perhaps best known for being one of the illustrators of the *Roy of the Rovers* comic strip.

years with England quit for the riches of the United Arab Emirates, working as the national team's manager. He thus became something of a pariah in England and never worked in football again. What was Revie's recipe for such prolonged success at Leeds? His former player Johnny Giles attempted to come up with an answer, saying: "With every successful team people want to know the secret, so they look for superficial things like the dossiers, or what players had for their pre-match meal, or even playing bingo before matches when we were away from home. What made Don so successful at Leeds was years of good practice. Getting the best players in, and then providing the right environment for good players and good characters to flourish. It wasn't the dossiers, it wasn't the pre-match meals and it wasn't the bingo."¹⁸

Derby County

Derby County, a founder member of the Football League, was one of the strongest clubs in England at the turn of the 20th century, defeated in three FA Cup finals in the six seasons 1897/98 to 1902/03 and First Division runners-up in 1895/96. Another good period either side of the Second World War saw Derby twice more finish second and win the FA Cup in 1945/46. By the 1950s, however, Derby had fallen into Division Three. Regaining their position in Division Two in 1957, the club trod water for the next decade, finishing no higher than seventh and often in the bottom half.

Things were to change with the appointment of Brian Clough as manager in 1967. A prolific goalscorer for his hometown club Middlesbrough and later Sunderland, Clough suffered a catastrophic knee injury in 1962. He attempted a comeback two years later but was forced to retire aged 29. After briefly coaching Sunderland's youth team, in October 1965 Clough became manager of the Fourth Division club then known as Hartlepool United. Clough had had something of a reputation as an obstreperous player; he carried his unorthodoxies into management. In November 1959 a dozen of his Middlesbrough teammates wrote a collective letter to the club board expressing 'no confidence' in Clough, who was team captain at the time. According to them, Clough was "too much of a lone wolf" and did not mix with other players on away trips. The directors rejected the complaints. The following summer Clough refused to sign the contract offered – this was a time when players had no say in such matters – so did not get paid. At the time clubs could retain a player's registration against his will; Clough was therefore risking his very livelihood by taking such a stance. Shortly before the 1960/61 season Clough relented and signed a new contract but, missing the whole of pre-season training, began in the reserves. He also had the captaincy removed. Eventually, in July 1961, one of Clough's many transfer requests was accepted; he was sold to Sunderland.

He became manager of Hartlepool United at the age of 30 becoming thereby was the youngest in such a role in the league. One of Clough's first public pronouncements was typically unconventional. Forfeiting his £40¹⁹ per week pay because the club was in financial difficulty, Clough declared he could live for the time being on his savings, the insurance

18 Source: <https://www.fourfourtwo.com/features/don-revies-dossiers-truth-behind-leeds-legends-famous-case-studies>

19 Worth around £825 in 2025.

money from his enforced retirement from playing and the £5,000 he received from his testimonial game. Another potential money-saving exercise Clough undertook was to pass his public service vehicle driving test so he could drive the team coach to away matches should it be required. His assistant at Hartlepool was a former goalkeeper named Peter Taylor he knew from their time together at Middlesbrough. The pair were to form an enduring partnership that served several clubs. Hartlepool had finished in the bottom two of the Fourth Division five times in the previous six seasons, but under Clough and Taylor improved to eighth place in 1966/67.

Meanwhile, Derby County were looking for a new manager. Former Newcastle United and Sunderland player Len Shackleton, at this time a north-east-based journalist, recommended the Clough/Taylor duo to Derby chairman Sam Longson.²⁰ Their first season resulted in an 18th-place finish but Clough and Taylor oversaw a complete overhaul of the first-team squad, retaining just four players – Kevin Hector, Alan Durban, Ron Webster and Colin Boulton – and signing many others, including Roy McFarland, John O’Hare and Alan Hinton. These players were to form the core of the squad for the next few years. A key signing in 1968 was former Scotland international and Tottenham Hotspur ‘Double winner’ Dave Mackay, whom Clough converted from a midfielder into a defender. With the addition of Mackay and midfielder Willie Carlin, signed from Sheffield United for £60,000, Clough’s team was complete, winning the 1968/69 Second Division title by seven points. Derby fared well in the top division, finishing fourth in 1969/70 and ninth in 1970/71. The following season Derby were unbeaten in their first 12 games but a mid-season slump saw them slip behind the leaders. A 2-0 victory over Leeds United at Easter and a final game 1-0 win over Liverpool gave Derby the advantage over their two closest rivals. However, fixture congestion meant these two clubs both had one match to play – two days after the FA Cup final in which Leeds beat Arsenal 1-0. Leeds needed a point from their final match away to Wolverhampton Wanderers to complete the league and cup double; if they slipped up, a Liverpool win at Arsenal would give them the title. Meanwhile, Brian Clough went on holiday. The players were sunning themselves in Mallorca when everything fell Derby’s way: Leeds lost 2-1, whilst Liverpool could only draw 0-0. These two teams and Manchester City all finished on 57 points, one behind Derby, who were English champions for the first time. *The Times* reporter Geoffrey Green hailed the fact that Derby won the league with a squad of just 14 regular players who were fortunate to remain largely injury-free.

Both Derby County and Brian Clough were to win the league title again, but not together. Soon after the start of the 1973/74 season simmering disagreements between the outspoken and increasingly media-motivated Clough and the more traditional Derby chairman Sam Longson came to a boil; Clough and Taylor resigned. Seeking a new manager, Derby were turned down by Ipswich Town’s Bobby Robson, so persuaded their former player Dave Mackay to leave the manager’s job at East Midlands rivals Nottingham Forest. Mackay’s first task was to mollify a squad unhappy at the nature of Clough’s departure. Without a win in his first few weeks, Mackay was to transform his team’s fortunes with the signing of

²⁰ Longson was born near Chapel-en-le-Frith, Derbyshire, in April 1900. He founded a haulage company that initially used horse-drawn barges on canals, then steam-powered traction engines and finally road lorries. He sold the business in 1967.

midfielder Bruce Rioch from Aston Villa, so much so they finished third. The £100,000 signing of England international Francis Lee from Manchester City and the emergence of young centre forward Roger Davies proved vital during the 1974/75 season in which there was no outstanding team, so that Derby's bad start of one win in their first seven matches was not consequential. Taking 30 points from their final 20 games (with two points for a win), Derby won their second league title with a relatively low total of 53 points.

Writing in *The Times*, reporter Gerry Harrison remarked on how Mackay had found intolerable and insoluble circumstances when he arrived as manager. The players – some of whom he had played alongside – staged a sit-in, threatened to strike, signed a letter demanding the reinstatement of Brian Clough, refused to train under Mackay and turned up for one game just 75 minutes before kick-off. Rather than laying down the law, Mackay read the situation as well as he did when on the pitch and played the role of sympathetic diplomat, saying: "I don't blame the players. I can understand their feelings. They [have] reasons." Players win games, not managers, but I want to take all the credit for direction and leadership. If we had been fighting relegation I know who would have taken all the blame." Mackay – who had no coaching qualifications – was not so diplomatic when talking about the largely negative approach in top level English football prevalent at the time, opining: "Coaches are making a simple game difficult, trying to turn players into robots. They use mystical phrases and involved theories and formations – most of it is rubbish. I want no part of it. Derby have won the championship by concentrating on scoring more goals than the opposition."

The next 18 months proved that memories are short in football. The 1975/76 season was a decent one for Mackay and Derby as they finished fourth, but after a poor start to 1976/77 Mackay was sacked. Relegated in 1980, Derby then went down to the third tier four years later. Since that time they have spent time in the Premier League, the Championship and League One, but have never come close to repeating the feats of Clough and Mackay.

Nottingham Forest

Following his resignation from Derby County, Brian Clough briefly managed Brighton and Hove Albion and – even more briefly – Leeds United, where he was sacked after just 44 days, accused of alienating many Leeds players who maintained a sense of loyalty to Don Revie. Out of work for four months, Clough was appointed manager of Nottingham Forest in January 1975.

After finishing runners-up to league champions Manchester United in 1966/67, Forest fell into decline until they were relegated in 1971/72, the season Clough won the league with Derby. In the two-and-a-half seasons since, Forest had not looked like regaining a place in the First Division. With Forest standing in the lower half of the Division Two table, he was under no pressure to achieve instant promotion. As ever, Clough was bullish on arrival, talking up his own achievements and abilities but at the same time preaching patience: "This is the size of my task – to put right seven years of tragic and suicidal decline. We can't get out of the Second Division by waving a magic wand....." In fact, if anything, Clough was underplaying his own ability – and that of Taylor, who rejoined his boss in July 1976 – to

wave a magic wand; within six years of making this statement Forest had won the league championship, two European Cups, one European Super Cup and two League Cups.

However, Forest's promotion in Clough's second full season came as something of a surprise. When Clough took over in January 1975, Forest were 13th. They ended the season 16th. Finishing eighth in 1975/76. When Forest finished their 1976/77 programme they held the third and final promotion place. Bolton Wanderers, in fourth, were four points behind with three games left to play, but with an inferior goal difference. They won the first of these so needed a win and a draw from their final two matches to deny Forest promotion; defeat to Wolves in their penultimate game sent Forest up. Forest's promotion squad was an amalgamation of the rejuvenated old, the well-scouted new and the handily familiar. In the first category were midfielder Ian Bowyer, previously overweight left-winger John Robertson, reserve right-winger Martin O'Neill, midfielder-turned-striker Tony Woodcock – who had been out on loan – and young right back Viv Anderson, whom Clough and Taylor turned into a first-team regular. These five were later to win multiple medals with Forest, whilst four were to play in the 1982 World Cup for their countries. The 'new' were left back Frank Clark, who, late in his career, had been considering dropping down the leagues, strikers Garry Birtles and Peter Withe and former Liverpool centre half Larry Lloyd. The familiar were his former Derby (and Leeds) players John McGovern and John O'Hare. The only player signed immediately after promotion was Kenny Burns. Switching the latter from the forward line to central defence proved to be a masterstroke, but his on-field discipline did not immediately improve – after one early game Burns and Larry Lloyd were fined by Clough and Taylor for incidents caught on camera but missed by the referee. Said Taylor: "There are standards at this club and [Burns and Lloyd] let us down. It has cost both a very hefty fine because we have always punished players for violent conduct or bad behaviour and always will."

Forest won their first three matches before losing 3-0 at Arsenal. If this defeat brought any doubts into the minds of Clough and his team, it did not show; they did not lose again until two defeats in November. By this time Forest had signed Peter Shilton, one of the two best goalkeepers in the country, and another of Clough's Derby old boys, Archie Gemmill. Forest remained undefeated in the league for the rest of the season, with 14 wins and 12 draws in their final 26 matches. They won the title by seven points from Liverpool, who they also beat in the League Cup final. Conceding just 24 league goals, Forest became the first team since Ipswich Town in 1962 to win the top league immediately after going up. No club has done that since.

Shilton apart, Forest had no stars in their squad, but winning the title raised several of them into that category, notably Viv Anderson and Tony Woodcock, who became regular England internationals. *The Times* reporter Norman Fox called the experienced John McGovern and John O'Hare the 'mortar' that held the team together. Withe, Woodcock and the rehabilitated and revitalised winger John Robertson made Forest's attack the most effective in the league. At the back, Burns and Lloyd formed an unlikely defensive wall comprising players unwanted by their previous clubs; Burns because of his disciplinary record and Lloyd because he was thought to be past his best. When the *Daily Mail's* Jeff Farmer pressed

Clough to reveal his 'secret', Clough responded: "There are no secret formulae or short cuts. The first ingredient is ability, and then you add sweat, worry and hard work. Some people seem to think that management comes easy to me but they couldn't be more wrong ... I find it very hard work, draining as well. Just coping with everything that crops up makes me very tired."

Clough's apparently fantastical aim was to win the 1978/79 European Cup seemed even less likely when in the first round they were drawn against Liverpool, who had won the tournament in the two previous seasons. However, Forest's chances seemed even more preposterous when they sold centre forward Peter Withe to Newcastle United, leaving the untried Gary Birtles, signed for £2,000 from non-league Long Eaton United, to lead the attack. Birtles had made his debut in the Second Division in March 1977 but had not played since. Clough added to the obfuscation by stating that young Birtles was the only one of his players certain to be selected to face the two-time European champions. His inexperience did not show – or matter – as he opened the scoring midway through the first half. A late second by left back Colin Barrett gave Forest a 2-0 lead to take to Anfield, where a goalless draw sent the upstart Forest through. This was just the start: subsequent wins over AEK Athens, Grasshopper Club Zürich and 1. FC Köln took Forest to the final in Munich, where they were to play Malmö FF of Sweden. Meanwhile, in February 1979 Forest made the 24-year-old Birmingham City forward Trevor Francis Britain's first £1 million player. Not eligible to play in the European Cup until the final, Francis scored the only goal of a game marred by Malmö's tactics that frequently caught Forest's players offside.

Forest were European champions, to go with consecutive League Cup wins and a defence of the league title that brought them the relative disappointment of second place, but with only three league defeats all season. The following season Forest slipped to fifth in the league and lost to Wolves in their third consecutive League Cup final, but their defence of their European title could not have gone better. They were again fortunate in that Liverpool and AC Milan surprisingly fell in the first round, but the semi-finals – unlike the previous year – featured four powerful sides; Forest beat Ajax and Hamburg beat Real Madrid. Forest again won the final against Hamburg 1-0, with a goal by John Robertson. It had been a wondrous rise from scraping promotion in 1977 to winning the European Cup for the second time three years later.

There was a third place in 1983/84, but it took almost a decade for Clough to build another trophy-winning team. Forest won the League Cup in 1988/89 and 1989/90, were runners-up in 1991/92, and reached the FA Cup final in 1990/91. It was another indicator of Clough's innate ability that he was able to do this. But then came the rapid fall; Forest were relegated in Clough's final season before retirement, 1992/93.²¹ Since then Forest have spent most of their time in the second tier, with just a handful of seasons in the Premier League and three seasons in League One.

Aston Villa

²¹ Clough died of stomach cancer in September 2004, aged 69.

Like Derby County and Nottingham Forest, Aston Villa have a long and storied history. Founded in 1874, Villa were one of the founder members of the Football League. In 1887 they became the first midlands club to win the FA Cup. In fact, for over 30 years Villa were arguably the most dominant club in English football, winning the league six times between 1894 and 1910 and the FA Cup six times between 1887 and 1920. However, for the next six decades Villa rarely came close to such consistent glory again, winning the FA Cup in 1957 and the League Cup in 1961, 1975 and 1977. In the league there were two second places in the 1930s but there were also several seasons in Division Two and, in the early 1970s, two seasons in Division Three. Promotion to the First Division in 1975, alongside that year's League Cup success, proved to be the beginning of a period of gradual improvement that culminated in Villa becoming both English and European champions. Significant to this upturn was the 1974 appointment of Birkenhead-born Ron Saunders as manager.

In a playing career that spanned 16 years from 1951, Saunders, described as 'an old-fashioned' centre forward, scored 207 goals in 392 league games for five clubs, most notably Portsmouth. He then moved into management at Yeovil Town, Oxford United, Norwich City and Manchester City, leading Norwich to the First Division for the first time in their history and taking them to the League Cup final. Saunders also reached the League Cup final with Manchester City, but was sacked in 1974 because of City's poor league form. Out of work for a month, on his appointment to Villa he suffered six defeats in ten matches in November and December, jeopardising their promotion challenge. However, just one loss in the remaining four months and eight consecutive wins to finish the season saw them promoted in second place behind Manchester United. In their first season back in the First Division Villa finished 16th, but the next four seasons brought consistent top-ten placings. Ironically it was the sales of the club's two best players, Andy Gray and John Gidman, for a combined £1.75 million that enabled Saunders to recruit unheralded players such as Kenny Swain, Des Bremner and Tony Morley, who, alongside emerging homegrown players Gary Williams, Colin Gibson and Gary Shaw, made major contributions over the next few seasons.

Lacking a consistent striker after the sale of Gray, Saunders solved this problem in the summer of 1980 by paying £500,000 – a substantial fee at the time – for Newcastle United and former Nottingham Forest centre forward Peter Withe, who immediately struck up a profitable partnership with Shaw. With the mercurial Morley on the left wing, a solid midfield of Dennis Mortimer, Bremner and locally born Gordon Cowans, plus a dependable defence that rarely changed, Villa won the title by four points from Ipswich Town. Incredibly lucky with injuries and suspensions, Villa used just 14 players in the league all season, with seven being ever-present. In addition – remarkably for a championship-winning team – Villa had no current internationals in their squad, were not competing in European competition and were knocked out early in both domestic cups, unlike their main rivals Ipswich. No Villa player played more than 46 games, whereas several Ipswich players played 64, 65 and 66, plus international matches and still in three competitions towards the end of the season their league form suffered, losing seven of their last ten games to hand Villa the title.

Debates about winning with style entered proceedings. The closest contenders to Villa were Ipswich, whose squad included Netherlands and England internationals, and with their

ultimately successful UEFA Cup campaign, were seen as sophisticated and 'European'; Villa were what the *Daily Mail* called "traditional and purposeful". Writing in the same newspaper, reporter Jeff Powell was damning: "The new champions are the battery hens of the British game, entirely home-grown and programmed to keep plugging away whatever the conditions." Football managers did recognise what Saunders had done. Liverpool's Bob Paisley opined: "Ron would to be the first to admit he used to be too hard a 'task master' but he's come to terms with this, and now he's coaxed his players through. There's nothing complicated or fancy about what he does. Unlike some people in the game, Ron doesn't talk over [players'] heads." Ipswich's Bobby Robson added: "[Ron's] one of the best bread-and-butter managers in the game. He's not the flashy champagne and cigar type who make controversial statements. He knows when to bite his tongue. Ron can be abrupt, but he's not a rude man. He looks, tough, dour and unsmiling, but I think he's just a solid, conscientious guy." Saunders did not disagree, saying: "I'm a simple sort of person who knows what he wants and says what he wants. Football is a simple game and ours is a simple philosophy for trying to keep it simple."

The Villa board, it appeared, wished to complicate things. Saunders had been appointed on a 'rolling' three-year contract, meaning he always had three years remaining on his agreement. This scenario provided both stability and security for Saunders, but it also meant that were Villa ever to sack him he would be due three years' worth of financial compensation. The club desired to change this state of affairs. It came to boil in February 1982 when chairman Ron Bendall informed Saunders that his three-year contract now had a termination date; he would have to negotiate a new deal when it ended. It seemed a reasonable enough business decision but the obstinate Saunders was so unhappy that he – simply – walked out, stating that the new terms on offer would make him nothing more than "an office boy".

Meanwhile, Villa had reached the quarter-final of the European Cup, in which they were to play Dynamo Kiev.²² It was quite a momentous decision in such a context for Saunders to turn his back on the club. His assistant Tony Barton and first-team coach Roy McLaren were put in temporary charge. As if to prove they could perform just as well without their former manager, Villa beat Kiev 2-0 on aggregate, after which Barton was appointed permanent manager. They then defeated R.S.C. Anderlecht 1-0 in the semi-final. Villa were thus set the task of keeping the cup in England for the sixth consecutive season, but were underdogs against Bayern Munich in Rotterdam. Villa overcame the loss through injury of experienced goalkeeper Jimmy Rimmer, replaced by novice Nigel Spink – who was excellent throughout – to sneak an unexpected win thanks to a typical burst by Tony Morley and a shinned, in-off-the-post, goal by Peter Withe. Tony Barton, unknown three months earlier, was now the manager of the European champions. Two years later he was sacked; another example of football's very short memory.

Blackburn Rovers

²² The club is now known as Dynamo Kyiv.

Another club with a long and sometimes glorious history is Blackburn Rovers. Founded in 1875, they were founder members of the Football League. The first provincial club to reach the FA Cup final in 1882, when they were beaten by Old Etonians, Blackburn then won the cup in 1884, 1885, 1886, 1890 and 1891. The league title evaded them until they won it twice in three seasons just before the First World War. Another FA Cup was won in 1928, but Blackburn were relegated for the first time in their history in 1936. For the next few decades the club bounced between the top two divisions, their best placing being seventh in 1963/64. Relegation followed two years later, and a few seasons in Division Three in the 1970s added to their demise. Then came three consecutive Division Two play-off final defeats in the late 1980s before promotion to the top division finally arrived *via* the play-offs in 1991/92. Blackburn thus became founder members of the Premier League.

The catalyst of Blackburn's rise was the January 1991 purchase of the club by local steel magnate Jack Walker. Born in Blackburn in 1929, Walker took over the family business in 1951 and developed it from scrap metal dealers into a major steel stockholding company. By the late 1980s 'Walkersteel' was making multi-million pound annual profits; soon afterwards Walker sold the company for £360 million to the British Steel Corporation. Walker had already contributed towards the redevelopment of Blackburn's Ewood Park ground, but now, with money in his pocket and no business to run, he decided to buy his hometown club. Backing up his words with money, Walker twice broke the British transfer record to sign strikers Alan Shearer from Southampton in 1992 and Chris Sutton from Norwich City in 1994. Walker also spent millions upgrading Ewood Park and the club's training facilities. He was able to lure Kenny Dalglish back into management almost eight months after he resigned from the manager's job at Liverpool. Dalglish's influence was apparent; Rovers were in the middle of the table when he joined and improved just enough to make the final play-off place, which led to promotion.

Blackburn's rise on the back of Walker's money began to take off. Shearer arrived from Southampton for £3.4 million but ruptured his anterior cruciate ligament halfway through the season. In his absence a fourth-place finish was highly creditable. The 1993/94 season went even better; aided by the return to fitness of Shearer, Rovers were runners-up to Manchester United. The £5 million signing of Sutton from Norwich City in July 1994 gave Shearer an ideal partner in attack. The partnership accounted for 49 Premier League goals. Battling Manchester United all season, Rovers came out on top by one point, despite losing three of their last five games.

The *Times* report pointed out that Walker's four-year £50 million spend on team and stadium was not much less than Blackburn Borough Council's total budget in the same time-frame. Walker's expenditure amounted to nothing less than "an important social change in the north-west", opined *The Times*. This was quite a claim, but the fact that Rovers' attendances had almost trebled to close to 30,000 in Walker's time in charge supported the idea that much more in the town than the football club had benefited from the owner's largesse.

Other metrics were also noted: the boroughs of Blackburn and Darwen had 142,700 inhabitants; the Manchester United supporters' club had 122,000 paid subscribers. At a push

30,000 spectators could squeeze into Ewood Park; Manchester United were about to spend £27 million increasing the capacity of Old Trafford to 55,000. With such discrepancies there was little wonder Blackburn had to rely on what *The Times* called “pragmatic tenacity rather than free-flowing style” to win the league. That and having two of the best strikers in the country. In fact just three players – Jason Wilcox, Mark Atkins and Bobby Mimms – remained from the pre-Dalglish days. Rovers (or rather Walker) had spent £18.3 million – a lot for the early 1990s – on players. Dalglish was just the fourth manager to win league titles with two different clubs, but he could not have achieved it without Walker’s massive financial backing. Stepping down a month after winning the league, Dalglish moved to the director of football position. He left the club in 1997. In 1999 Rovers were relegated. The following year Jack Walker died. So ended Blackburn Rovers’ brief period in the limelight. Since then they have spent periods in the Premier League, the Championship and League One.

Leicester City

Leicester City Football Club came into existence in 1919 after Leicester Fosse, a club founded in 1884, ceased trading. City assumed Fosse’s place in Division Two. Over the next 70 years City moved between the top two divisions, won the League Cup three times and were FA Cup runners-up four times. After spending a season in League One in 2008/09 they won promotion to the Premier League in 2014. For most of the 2014/15 season a quick return to the Championship seemed probable, but a run of seven wins from their last nine fixtures saw Leicester stay up with some ease. After beating Manchester United 5-3 in September Leicester gained only three points from the next 14 games. At the turn of the year they had just ten points from 18 games and were five points adrift at the bottom. Manager Nigel Pearson was having a hard time. Fined £10,000 after swearing at a fan in December, two months later he was lucky to keep his job following a sideline altercation with Crystal Palace player James McArthur,

Owner and chairman Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha wanted to fire Pearson but his son and vice-chairman Aiyawatt talked him out of it. The two Thais became involved with Leicester City in August 2010 when their Bangkok-based duty-free and travel retail group King Power International signed a shirt-sponsorship deal with the club. This soon led to a Thai-led consortium named Asian Football Investments (AFI) buying Leicester from Serbian-American businessman Milan Mandarić. The new owners did nothing but good for both Leicester City and the city of Leicester, donating £1 million to Leicester Royal Infirmary and the same amount to the University of Leicester, as well paying the medical bills of sick local children, providing free coaches, beer and scarves for Leicester fans and buying expensive cars and holidays for the players and their wives. Vichai felt he could change the community for the better and wanted to be a part of it, which is why when in October 2018 he and four others died in a helicopter crash just yards from Leicester’s King Power Stadium there was such an outpouring of grief in the city.

In the summer of 2015 they dismissed Pearson, stating that “the working relationship is no longer viable”. He was replaced by the former Chelsea manager Claudio Ranieri. It was the 63-year-old Italian’s ninth managerial job in 11 years. The previous year Ranieri had been sacked as head coach of the Greece national team after just four months in charge following

a defeat to the Faroe Islands. Known in England as ‘The Tinkerman’ for his penchant for constantly changing the team during his time at Chelsea between 2000 and 2004, and also as someone who always had a quirky comment to hand, Ranieri had actually been quite successful at many of his former clubs but was now regarded by many in the media as something of a caricature of his former self.”

Leicester won three and drew three of their first six games, before losing 5-2 at home to Arsenal. The man Vardy scored 13 in 11 consecutive games, a Premier League record. Leicester lost 1-0 to Liverpool on Boxing Day but were then defeated just once more all season and won the Premier League by a staggering ten points. Their pre-season odds to win the title had been as long as 5,000-to-1 with some bookmakers. Over the previous few seasons Leicester had picked up bargains such as Vardy, Leonardo Ulloa, Riyad Mahrez, Danny Drinkwater and Wes Morgan and with the 2015 additions of Christian Fuchs, Robert Huth and N’Golo Kanté, Ranieri was able to mould them into a team – as the saying goes – ‘greater than the sum of its parts’.

Throughout the season Ranieri was box office. He bought each player and member of staff a small bell as a Christmas present. When asked why he replied: “From the beginning when something was wrong I’ve been saying: ‘Dilly-ding, dilly-dong, wake up, wake up!’ His players elicited some memorable remarks, such as his description of the Sheffield-born striker Jamie Vardy, who cost £1.7 million from then non-league Fleetwood Town in 2012: “This is not a footballer. This is a fantastic horse.” Before a game against Liverpool he referenced a famous line from the film *Forrest Gump*: “Why can’t we continue to run, run, run? We are like Forrest Gump. Leicester is Forrest Gump. I give you the headline there.”

It was the first trophy many of them had ever won in professional football, but midfielder Andy King was used to finishing top of the league – he was the first (and only) player to win the League One, the Championship and the Premier League with the same club. But like many surprise league winners before them, the glory days could not be maintained. Leicester had a good run in the Champions League, beaten in the quarter-finals by Atlético Madrid, but their league form suffered. In February 2017, with Leicester in the bottom half of the table, Ranieri was sacked.

A Common Denominator?

What makes for an improbable league title winner? Is it a great manager? A rich owner? A happy coalescence of circumstances? The absence of top-quality competition? Good fortune? A sympathetic and empathetic chairman? A competent board of directors? As we have seen with the study of seven such instances, there is no single, catch-all answer. The chairmen and/or majority shareholders of Ipswich Town, Leeds United, Derby County, Nottingham Forest and Aston Villa were typical of such individuals in 1960s and 1970s football – (usually) local businessmen out of the mould of ‘butcher, baker, candlestick maker’ whose relative wealth was insufficient to make a material difference to his team. This model of club stewardship began to change in the early 1990s, with Jack Walker one of the first owners with the personal resources to dramatically improve his club’s fortunes by means of expensive – sometimes record-breaking – signings, in his case Alan Shearer and Chris Sutton.

Walker was also able to appoint a previously successful, 'big-name' manager, which also applied to Nottingham Forest in the 1970s. However, none of the other managers examined here were anywhere close to 'great' when they were hired.

The appointment of a football manager is a notoriously risky business, especially if he is an unknown quantity. Even a manager with a proven track record – such as Claudio Ranieri – may not succeed at another club, the reasons for which are often inexplicable. Appointing a football manager is certainly not an exact science; some clubs obviously get it right – perhaps by chance. Alf Ramsey was known as an intelligent and thoughtful footballer, but the Ipswich Town board of directors really had no clue whether he would be able to transfer these qualities to a managerial role. The fact that he did, and also proved to be both tactically innovative and an excellent 'man-manager', carried his new club to an unexpected championship with a team devoid of star names or expensive signings. The – connected – intangibles known as 'momentum', 'belief' and 'confidence' are also relevant here. In Ipswich Town's case there was little indication in the first half of the season that they would be champions, but when they got on a good run from early February the 'momentum' began to mount and became self-perpetuating, resulting in increased belief and confidence amongst the players.

In the case of Leeds United, their manager Don Revie was – like Ramsey – tactically aware, but his qualities included a preparedness and a ruthlessness arguably unmatched by any of his contemporaries. The unusual aspect of Revie's managership in comparison with others discussed here was that he maintained his Leeds team as a force for a decade, winning and almost winning multiple trophies. Revie was a one-off, loved by his players and his club's fans but outside of these groups was widely disliked in football. Derby County saw something in the maverick Brian Clough, who proved to be exactly what they wanted him to be – an inspirational, motivational, out-of-the-ordinary character that his controversial playing career suggested he might be. Nottingham Forest's appointment of the same man was perhaps something of a gamble despite his achievements at Derby. In the meantime he had failed at Brighton and – miserably – at Leeds, so his stock was on the wane. Aston Villa saw an incremental improvement under the supervision of an old-school, single-minded, plain-speaking manager. Ron Saunders assembled a well-organised team of unacknowledged players who enjoyed a season of incredible fortune in that it suffered so few injuries it could maintain an almost constant line-up, aided by the fact that the league was the only competition they were concerned with. This was a case of a 'perfect storm'.

Blackburn Rovers were the beneficiary of a takeover by a mega-rich local fan and the appointment of a previously successful, big-name manager. The former was an indicator of both the new football world of the Premier League and the political and economic climate of the capitalist doctrines of early 1990s Britain, the latter an outlier in this analysis in that Kenny Dalglish was undoubtedly a great player.

Leicester City were also bought by a mega-rich businessman, but one who was the exact opposite of local. Nevertheless, Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha proved to be a rare philanthropic overseas owner who happened to fall on a winning formula. He kept on a manager who might have been sacked, which proved to be a good move, then sacked the same man

somewhat unexpectedly and appointed in his place someone who was supposedly over the hill. Somehow this media-friendly and jokey manager maintained an atmosphere of intense, continuous concentration and high performance. This, allied with the simultaneous underperformance of the two Manchester clubs, Liverpool and Chelsea amounted to a serendipitous season unmatched in modern English football history. There appears no semblance of a pattern or template that guarantees the success achieved by the clubs examined here. It seems as much a matter of luck as it is ability, commitment, temperament and decision-making. Money helps, of course. Jack Walker's millions came at an early stage of the Premier League and were enough to win the title for his club. Three decades later such monies would be negligible in the era of billion-dollar takeovers and hundred-plus million player transfer fees.

A bigger mystery is why in 100 years Sheffield United have never dropped on that latent permutation of manager, owner, players, good fortune and effective spending to have won a single major trophy. How could the formula for footballing success escape one club for a century and meanwhile 40-plus other clubs have won something? Why are Sheffield United uniquely compromised by not being able to get their act together? Are they atrociously unfortunate? Is it generations of boardroom incompetence allied to an overwhelming fear of failure that has meant the club has always striven to survive more than to win? What, we ask, is the combination of circumstances that has prevented United winning anything of note for so long? To seek an answer we might consider a number of external factors that could conceivably (however unlikely) have had a bearing on United's historical fortunes. Could geography – and its concomitant national economic disparities – be important? What about the philanthropic nature (or otherwise) of Sheffield's commercial and industrial barons? And does United supporters' craving for their team to be better than Sheffield Wednesday supplant any desire to achieve anything more prestigious? Continuing with questions, surely the identification and employment of both managers and players are vital? Does the way United supporters perceive both themselves and the club have some sort of psychological effect on the team? Does the 'character' (if indeed there is such a thing) of Sheffield and Sheffielders filter through to the players, coaches and directors, somehow stifling their talents? Let us attempt to answer some of these questions. We can start with geographical and soci-economic considerations.

A North-South Divide

In 1921 the Football League expanded its membership by introducing two new divisions – Division Three (North) and Division Three (South). Several members of the northern section have subsequently either folded (some later re-forming as 'phoenix' clubs) or spent time in 'non-league'. Only Grimsby Town have played in English football's top division. None has won a major trophy and just one, Wrexham, has played in European competition, thanks to winning the Welsh Cup a number of times. The remainder have been perennial dwellers of the bottom two divisions. In contrast, many founder members of the southern section – Southampton, Portsmouth, Luton Town. Queen's Park Rangers, Swindon Town, Watford, Brentford, Swansea Town (now City), Millwall, Reading, Norwich City, Charlton Athletic, Northampton Town and Brighton and Hove Albion – have played in Division One and/or the

Premier League. Indeed, Portsmouth have won the league championship, Charlton Athletic, Southampton, Queen's Park Rangers and Watford have been league runners-up, whilst Charlton, Southampton, Portsmouth, Luton, Queen's Park Rangers, Swindon, Swansea and Norwich have won the FA Cup or the League Cup. In addition, Millwall, Watford and Brighton have been defeated FA Cup finalists.

Furthermore, the 1922 Football League AGM reported that in the first season of the new divisional set-up, overall gate receipts of Division Three (South) were double those of Division Three (North). Over subsequent years the teams from the south improved and became more successful; the northern teams meanwhile did not prosper. When the Fourth Division was introduced for the 1958/59 season, the bottom four clubs had to apply for re-election to the Football League, a poll being undertaken amongst their peers. In subsequent years five northern clubs – Gateshead, Bradford Park Avenue, Barrow, Workington and Southport – lost their league places to this process, replaced by Oxford United, Cambridge United, Hereford United, Wimbledon and Wigan Athletic, four of which were from the south (or at least the south midlands). Geographical considerations no doubt played a part in this anomaly, but it might be mainly attributed to finance: southern towns are generally richer than their northern counterparts and in some instances are very wealthy, which perhaps explains why more of the original Division Three (South) clubs have done much better than those from Division Three (North). The emergence of the southern teams certainly expanded the breadth of competition, but it does not throw any light upon why Sheffield United have been unable to match other northern clubs such as Blackburn Rovers, Sunderland, Blackpool, Preston North End, Bolton Wanderers, Huddersfield Town, Burnley, Wigan Athletic and Middlesbrough in terms of trophy-winning since the 1920s. Location and government economic policies have undoubtedly played some role in the football status of some English clubs. But might the local circumstances be of some consideration when we seek to explain an absence of footballing trophies?

Philanthropic Natures and Local Governance

Could Sheffield United's lack of footballing success be down to the status and influence of the men who historically ran the club? This question boils down to another: why aren't United considered a rich club? Maybe it is because the really wealthy Victorian factory owners in Sheffield – such as the Sanderson, Jessop and Vickers families, and individual steelmakers such as Mark Firth, Henry Steel, Samuel Osborn, Thomas Ward, Frederick Mappin, Robert Hadfield, Charles Cammell and John Brown, plus coal-mining entrepreneur Emerson Bainbridge, were not – we have to assume – interested in football. Many of these individuals were however philanthropic in their giving to good causes; football was not one of them. There was one steelman on Sheffield United's early boards: William Beardshaw, co-owner of the Baltic Works, which manufactured tools such as drills, saws and files, but he did not appear to be especially rich and died in 1895. His influence – such as it was – on the club was therefore short-lived.

Meanwhile, there is no record of any of United's directors over the years having direct involvement with the many coal mines that dotted the city and region. Outside of the heavy steel industry and coal mining, Sheffield's other main sources of commerce were cutlery and

light hand-tools and, to a lesser extent, silver-plating and sharp utensil manufacture, notably large knives, surgical instruments and razor blades. United's board of directors and chairmen over the decades included many men who made their living in these trades, as well as in law, dentistry, construction, education and the wholesale food markets. There was thus no intrinsic connection between local football and the large sources of local wealth.

Procedures might also have played a part. Sheffield United sought a democratic committee arrangement rather than being reliant on a 'benevolent dictator', a set-up that never allowed one man to dominate proceedings. The individuals on the football committee had their hearts in the right place but did not possess sufficient means to loan the club the monies required to buy and pay the best players. In their 1993 book *The History of the City of Sheffield 1843-1893, Volume II: Society*, authors Clyde Binfield *et al.* recognised the relative dearth of well-off individuals in Sheffield, noting "the lack of wealthy manufacturers before the rise of the steel masters, the absence of civic dignity before the creation of the borough [in 1843] and the homogeneity of Sheffield compared to that in contemporary towns", characteristics that, they argued, "have persisted to the present day" and which have historically hampered the economic progress of the city and, by extension (our assessment), its football clubs.

This scenario held true whatever the era. If we look at the mid 1920s – when United won the FA Cup – and the mid 1960s – when United were an average First Division team that won nothing – we will see that the make-up of the board was similar. The 1920s directors included Alfred Cattell (a head teacher), Charles Clegg (a solicitor), Frank Copestake (a wholesale fruit trader), George Marlow (a builder), Walter Sissons (an accountant), Percy Stokes (a solicitor) and Harry Willey (a steel rolling mill proprietor). Some 40 years later the names were different but the trades were similar. Now, however, United now felt it desirable to have two surgeons on the board in Frank O'Gorman and Blacow Yates. The other directors included Maurice Board (an accountant), Arnold Laver (a timber merchant), Frank Melling (an architect) and Dick Wragg (a builders' merchant). These were not – and never had been – men of great financial resources.

Municipal governance raises issues around local monies. Sheffield was dependent on its traditional industries, its commercial leaders failing to foresee a future of diversification into banking and insurance as nearby Leeds and Manchester did when they moved away from their historical reliance on respectively the wool and cotton trades. The contrast between the commercial activities of Sheffield and those of these cities and its other neighbour Nottingham is also notable. All three were major textile centres; Manchester was known as 'Cottonopolis', whilst Nottingham was famous for making lace and hosiery. Wool, cotton, stockings and steel were all global markets, but post-war the 'soft-product' cities became more successful at football than the Steel City. Whether or not this point is entirely relevant is arguable, but true.

We must also consider matters of parochial Identity. Are Sheffield United and the club's supporters preoccupied with the fortunes of Sheffield Wednesday to the detriment of their own prosperity? Are Sheffield United's sentiments and ambitions too insular? Of the clubs studied earlier Ipswich Town, Leeds United, Derby County and Leicester City have never

experienced such intra-city disputes, their rivalries with other clubs diluted by distance. It can be correctly argued that both Nottingham Forest and Aston Villa have city adversaries. However, Forest hardly recognise the existence of the much less successful Notts County as the two teams have rarely been in the same division. In Birmingham “the perceived condescension of Villa towards Birmingham [City]” and the fact that “the vast majority of confrontation is basically harmless, grounded as much in a performative, gladiatorial ribaldry as in genuine personal hatred” leaves the second-city rivalry not as pronounced as elsewhere.²³ Moreover, the district of Aston considered itself separate from the city of Birmingham until it was absorbed into the County Borough of Birmingham in 1911. In contrast, when Sheffield United were founded in 1889 they were immediately recognised as a threat to The Wednesday’s hitherto unchallenged pre-eminence. What’s more, their home grounds were just a quarter of a mile apart. It seems that since that moment United – and the club’s fans – have always been more bothered about finishing above Wednesday than above anybody else, as demonstrated by the fact that on the two occasions in recent years that United were promoted to the Premier League Blades fans delighted in singing “Mind the gap, mind the gap, Sheffield Wednesday!” in condescension at their neighbours’ lower status.

The Governance of Management

So we could be onto something here – a desire to be the best in the city, not the best (or even the tenth-best) in the country. But surely that cannot be the only reason for Sheffield United’s continued failure? Could the club’s various managerial selection decisions have influenced United’s lack of success? Since the 1950s the club has followed numerous, diverse, avenues when choosing a new manager. We have attempted to typecast United’s managers (in a somewhat arbitrary manner) and, inevitably with such imprecision, some managers fall into more than one category:

Recently retired former successful player – Joe Mercer, Martin Peters, Ian Porterfield, Adrian Heath, David Weir, Gary Speed, Steve Bruce

First managerial role – Joe Mercer, Martin Peters, Steve Bruce, Adrian Heath, Gary Speed, David Weir

Experienced in management at a high level – Bryan Robson, Howard Kendall, Slaviša Jokanović

Successful in the lower divisions – John Harris, Arthur Rowley, Ian Porterfield, Ken Furphy, Jimmy Sirrel, Harry Haslam, Neil Warnock, Micky Adams, Danny Wilson, Nigel Clough, Nigel Adkins, Chris Wilder, Paul Heckingbottom

Promotion from within – Martin Peters, Billy McEwan, Nigel Spackman, Kevin Blackwell, Gary Speed, Paul Heckingbottom

²³ Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news/aston-villa-vs-birmingham-second-city-derby-preview-time-when-pettiness-a8202706.html>

'Man of the people' – Dave Bassett, Neil Warnock, Micky Adams, Chris Wilder, Paul Heckingbottom

'Cerebral' – Howard Kendall, Nigel Spackman, Bryan Robson, David Weir, Slaviša Jokanović

Foreign – Slaviša Jokanović

Some observations on the above:

- John Harris fitted the club's traditional teetotal, churchgoing ideal that had proved so fruitful up to the 1930s.
- Arthur Rowley, who arrived having managed Shrewsbury Town, was a surprise appointment and a man about whom the directors appeared to have done little research as to his suitability.
- Ken Furphy was part of 'a new breed' of manager', young and progressive, who was the first manager in the club's history to spend more time on the training pitch than in the office. He had several years of managerial experience at Watford and Blackburn Rovers.
- Jimmy Sirrel and Harry Haslam were of contrasting character but each proven with one club in the lower divisions.
- Ian Porterfield was not as experienced as Sirrel or Haslam, having taken Rotherham United to promotion in just his second year as a manager.
- Martin Peters was the first 'promotion from within', and indicated a degree of succession planning. This method was followed in later years by the appointments of Billy McEwan, Nigel Spackman, Kevin Blackwell (albeit with a gap in between), Gary Speed and Paul Heckingbottom.
- Dave Bassett was viewed with suspicion at first due to his London background, but he shook up Sheffield United from top to bottom and restored the club's pride and position, before wearying under the burden of constant boardroom infighting.
- Howard Kendall was the first of the cadre of what might be termed 'cerebral' managers, which later included Nigel Spackman, Bryan Robson, David Weir and Slaviša Jokanović. Kendall and Spackman were reasonably successful before resigning, whilst Robson, Weir and Jokanović were unable to grasp the particular requirements of managing Sheffield United.
- Former Manchester United player Steve Bruce followed Kendall, first as player-manager. This was his first managerial role in what became a long and often successful career.
- Adrian Heath and David Weir were two 'out-of-the-blue' appointments, both highly regarded coaches but with no management experience. Both were brief and catastrophic.

- Neil Warnock was a ‘man of the people’ manager, followed later by Micky Adams, Chris Wilder, Paul Heckingbottom and Wilder again. Bassett was similar in style to this group, amongst whom only Adams was a failure.
- Danny Wilson, Nigel Clough and Nigel Adkins were all experienced managers below the elite level. Wilson and Clough were perhaps got rid of too soon, Adkins not soon enough.

There really is no logic apparent here as the club, often with the same directors making the decisions, stumbled from one type of manager to one of a completely different style time after time. It seemed the board was frequently attempting to recreate what had worked before, or alternatively trying to avoid repeating what had not worked before. Since the 1970s the club has employed poor decision-making in terms of both managerial structure and personnel. United have continually – it seems – lurched from youth to experience, from tracksuit manager to besuited manager, from promoting from within to bringing in promising young men who either left as quickly as they could or proved incapable of doing the job, and from appointing time-served lower-league managers to selecting former top-class players eager to try their hand in management for the first time. One approach United had not tried until 2021 was to follow the modern trend of appointing an overseas manager. This turned out to be a disaster, but then plenty of others had been disasters too.

Talent ID and Capture

The club’s player recruitment policy has been as haphazard as its selection of managers. In the early 1960s the preferred method was to source and grow locally born youngsters such as Alan Woodward, Len Badger, Geoff Salmons, Frank Barlow and David Munks, which was relatively successful in that it kept United in Division One until two of these players, Mick Jones and Alan Birchenall, were sold. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the youth policy was abandoned in favour of low-cost external signings to fill needs. Whether this change was because the local talent pool had dried up or because United did not adequately replace scout and assistant manager Archie Clark, who died in 1967, is open to question. Regardless of the reason, players such as Tony Currie, Eddie Colquhoun, Ted Hemsley, Dave Powell, John Flynn, Bill Dearden and Trevor Hockey, all purchased for moderate fees, were big factors in the team that won promotion and for a short period took the First Division by storm under John Harris.

Given virtually nothing to spend to overhaul an ageing squad, Harris’s successor Ken Furphy was instructed to buy cheap players with a potential re-sale value. Following the first part of this directive to the letter by signing mediocre players he knew from his previous clubs (Tony Field, Terry Garbett, David Bradford), these were not however players anybody else wished to sign. Instead they sought riches in the USA when United had no more need for them.²⁴ Jimmy Sirrel then reverted to the policy of promoting youth – he had little choice given the paucity of funds – and introduced Keith Edwards, Tony Kenworthy, Simon Stainrod and Gary

²⁴ Field later played alongside Pelé and Franz Beckenbauer for New York Cosmos. However, he was not a popular man at Bramall Lane. In his 2021 autobiography *Imperfect 10: The Man Behind The Magic*, Tony Currie called him “a horrible little shit”, adding: “Tony wasn’t a nice or likeable person.”

Hamson. However, the man who followed Sirrel, Harry Haslam, sold three of this quartet plus youngsters Ian Benjamin and Imre Varadi to pay for the relatively big names of Alejandro Sabella, Steve Finnieston and Peter Anderson. When this policy failed, the new chairman Reg Brealey gave the new manager Ian Porterfield difference-making money by Fourth Division standards to buy Edwards back and also to bring in Keith Waugh and Colin Morris.

Denied such funds in subsequent seasons, Porterfield resorted to signing one-time elite players on their way down (and on no doubt good salaries), which restored stability but did not excite the fans. Under Porterfield's successor Billy McEwan money was even tighter so it was back to cheap signings and hopeful punts from the juniors. Dave Bassett then dismantled the squad and rebuilt it, again having to buy on the cheap but somehow making it work. Bassett had the knack of finding 'diamonds in the rough' and polishing them into top-class performers or, at worst, reliable and productive workers. Brian Deane was his best signing but others such as Tony Agana, Simon Tracey, Ian Bryson and Carl Bradshaw were not far behind. Bassett also introduced youngsters Dane Whitehouse and Mitch Ward to the team.

New owners and new money enabled Howard Kendall to become the first Sheffield United manager to buy players costing over £1 million but he showed little interest in developing youth. Following Kendall were Nigel Spackman and Steve Bruce, both of whom were denied the funding their predecessor had enjoyed, but their time in charge saw an upsurge in the introduction of young players into the first team in the shape of Wayne Quinn, Curtis Woodhouse and Lee Morris. Neil Warnock initially had to work with very little money, but what he was able to spend he did so well, particularly on Michael Brown. By this time United's revived youth recruitment was beginning to produce good players, often signed as teenage cast-offs from big clubs; Phil Jagielka, Michael Tonge, Nick Montgomery and Stephen Quinn all became first-team regulars. Warnock was given good monies in his last two seasons, with contrasting fortunes. His signings during 2005/06 were mostly experienced players on free transfers but high salaries (Craig Short, Neil Shipperley, Keith Gillespie and David Unsworth), which proved successful, but spending around £4 million on four players in January 2007 did not turn out well.

Bryan Robson, who followed Warnock, signed bigger names on bigger wages (James Beattie, Gary Speed, Gary Naysmith, Lee Hendrie and Ugo Ehiogu) but, like Warnock in his later years, ignored youth. Budget cuts meant Robson's successors Kevin Blackwell and Micky Adams were forced into extensive use of the loan market, but they did encourage three of the best young players ever to come through the academy in Kyle Naughton, Kyle Walker and Harry Maguire. In fact around this time United's academy produced dozens of players who made a career in league football but, seeking immediate rewards, the club let them leave in favour of loan players. This policy was later admitted by the United hierarchy to be a mistake that resulted in relegation.

The five managers who took charge of United in League One – Danny Wilson, David Weir, Nigel Clough, Nigel Adkins and Chris Wilder – were all restricted by cost-cutting measures (albeit the club's transfer and salary budgets were amongst the largest in the division), but

only Wilder managed to build a squad capable of promotion. Ironically, it was Adkins who brought back to Bramall Lane one of Wilder's most effective players, Billy Sharp. Throughout these six seasons several academy players made first-team appearances, the most successful being Harry Maguire, Matt Lowton, Dominic Calvert-Lewin, David Brooks and Aaron Ramsdale, all later sold to Premier League clubs. Wilder's spending in the Championship was modest, outgoings more than covered by the proceeds of the sale of Brooks, who had emerged from the juniors in 2017/18. Brooks was another picked up after being released by a major club (Manchester City), whilst Wilder joked that he did his shopping for players at the low-cost supermarket Aldi, rather than the higher quality establishments favoured by many of his rivals in the division. It was when back in the Premier League in 2019 that Wilder was given significant funds. His outlay of over £40 million, followed by a similar amount in 2020, was not remotely covered by player sales and did not prove to be value for money. After Wilder's departure and United's relegation, new manager Slaviša Jokanović was only permitted to recruit loan players, despite the £24 million sale of Ramsdale to Arsenal. Jokanović introduced the exciting Iliman Ndiaye to the team,²⁵ but it was only after the manager's replacement by former academy head coach Paul Heckingbottom that a new commitment to youth was established. Following promotion to the Premier League in 2023, United's transfer policy shifted again, this time towards young foreign players with potential to improve.

Since the 1960s Sheffield United have therefore followed a player recruitment and youth promotion policy as varied as their track record of managerial appointments. The club has lurched from developing young players to neglecting them completely, from spending large transfer fees to a reliance on loan players, and from paying high salaries to resorting to cutting costs in order to reduce the wage bill. The club's plans have seemingly always smacked of the 'here and now' with little thought given to five or ten years in the future. On the other hand, long-term planning is difficult when neither the manager nor the chairman is likely to last that long. But in that regard, Sheffield United are no different from a lot of other clubs, yet so many of those other clubs have won major trophies. Sheffield United have not.

The Modesty of Legitimation

Sheffield United have been promoted to the First Division/Premier League six times in the last 70 years: in 1960/61, 1970/71, 1989/90, 2005/06, 2018/19 and 2022/23. For an incumbent Sheffield United manager these dates – not trophy-winning years, because they do not exist – set the benchmark. Any manager who can replicate these seasons is considered a huge success, whilst a promotion from the lower divisions also endears a manager to the fans – at least in the short term – the prime example being Ian Porterfield. A manager who comes close but fails – Howard Kendall, Kevin Blackwell, Nigel Spackman, Nigel Clough – is applauded for his efforts but at the same time criticised – often loudly – for his and his team's shortcomings. The managers in those six promotion seasons were John Harris (twice), Dave Bassett, Neil Warnock, Chris Wilder and Paul Heckingbottom. As explained above, we

²⁵ Ndiaye's first appearance was actually as a substitute at the end of the previous season under then caretaker-manager Paul Heckingbottom.

are categorising the outgoing and straight-talking Bassett, Warnock and Wilder as the same 'type' of manager. Heckingbottom, whilst not as gregarious as this trio, was equally forthright and down-to-earth and was – literally – a student of the game having attained a University degree in Sports Coaching. In contrast, Harris was an introverted, almost shy, character, but one respected and admired by players and fans alike.

Harris was perhaps an antidote to his era, one in which English football was finally opening up to the fact that those darned 'Johnny Foreigners' could actually play a bit, and in which many aspects of life began to 'swing' as the 1960s progressed. Football's 'maximum wage' structure was abolished at the start of the decade; hitherto mysterious world-class performers such as Pelé, Alfredo Di Stéfano, Ferenc Puskás and Eusébio could be seen in action live on the pitch and in recorded footage through the media of television and newsreels. Moreover, the England national team actually won the World Cup. The 1960s was also a period when British society was changing (as it was throughout the USA and western Europe), with rebellious youth-led cultures of music, university campus demonstrations, riots of a variety of natures (often as a consequence of industrial disputes), the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, and anti-war and counter-culture protests. The ending of National Service in 1963 also played into this scenario.

Footballers eagerly followed new fashions as hairstyles grew longer and taller, clothes became more colourful and extravagant and music became louder and more defiant. Players could also now afford cars, which might become another expression of an individual's personality and relative wealth. Somehow the demure and modest Harris kept a group of young men who were his antithesis competitive for much of the 1960s (until relegation in 1968). Then, after a year away, he returned to restore United to the top division playing exciting, enterprising football. However, his teams never finished high enough to qualify for European competition and had a terrible record in the cups. For reasons of boardroom fearfulness signified by 'panic' sales, a shortage of investment in new players and a lack of foresight in allowing a successful squad to grow old, Harris was never able to cajole his team into taking the next step.

Bassett, Warnock and Wilder were of a different breed, outwardly passionate, outspoken and not afraid to challenge authority, evoking affection and loyalty from those players who fully bought into their styles and demands. High-energy, hard running and positive football were essentials. Bassett and Warnock were renowned for playing 'direct' football, whereas Wilder developed imaginative tactics to overcome packed defences. All three managers engendered team spirit and togetherness, which also extended to the fans, the groundstaff, the office staff, the cleaners, the caterers and everyone else involved – however vicariously – with the club. Bassett would join his players on nights out in Sheffield city centre, not to keep an eye on them but to join in the 'festivities' instigated by the likes of Billy Whitehurst, Simon Tracey and Glyn Hodges. Wilder, meanwhile, was often front and centre with a bottle of lager in his hand and once gave a live seven-minute interview to *BBC Radio Sheffield* in an 'emotional' state. Rather than cutting the interview short for fear of embarrassment, the interviewer (and his producer) played along with Wilder's gloriously rambling monologue. For this the broadcaster received much credit and Wilder's cult status grew ever larger.

Warnock never publicly declared any such liking for alcohol, preferring his non-footballing utterances to be about his wife and children. He also endured hard times in the early 2000s, almost getting sacked, before finally achieving promotion. This perhaps explains why Warnock was not as universally liked amongst Blades fans as Bassett and Wilder were, but nevertheless he got the job done.

Familiar with the ways of the club following his time as academy coach, Heckingbottom undid some of the changes installed by Slaviša Jokanović and reverted to many of the methods previously employed by Wilder. He even retained a number of the same players – eight appeared in both the 2018/19 and 2022/23 promotion seasons.

Despite their reputation for preferring physically strong and combative players, Bassett, Warnock, Wilder and Heckingbottom understood that skill and unpredictability were also crucial components of a winning team. To this end Bassett had the mercurial Welsh international Glyn Hodges (whom he referred to tongue-in-cheek as “our Brazilian”) and the elegance of England international centre forward Brian Deane. Warnock utilised the midfield promptings of the inspirational Michael Brown and the graceful probings of Michael Tonge out wide. Chris Wilder’s teams benefited from the calculating play of Mark Duffy operating behind the strikers and the passing accuracy of first Paul Coutts and later Oliver Norwood. Under Paul Heckingbottom Blades fans could appreciate the twinkling feet of Iliman Ndiaye and the precociousness of Manchester City loanee James McAtee.

We can thus confidently assert that since the 1970s the only times Sheffield United have been even moderately successful at the upper levels of English football have been under these four managers. We feel justified, therefore, in saying that the ‘fast forward’, ‘front foot’ style of football seems to suit Sheffield United much better than the more ‘languid’ methods of, for example, David Weir, Bryan Robson and Slaviša Jokanović. Put simpler, playing it out from the back has never suited United teams, not least because the majority of the players have never had the skill, composure, finesse and – perhaps – mental capacity required to retain the possession that such a tactic demands.

Artists Or Artisans?

Why this might be so deserves consideration. Are Sheffield United fans in their support never understanding of or sympathetic towards building play slowly from the back as opposed to the tactic explainable – in local dialect – *via* the phrases ‘gerrit forrad’ and ‘getitint’box’? If this is the case (and we feel it is), where does this penchant for the action-oriented style over the more careful approach of making up to two-dozen passes to progress 50 metres come from? Is it reducible to some correlate with a working-class ethos? If such a link is valid it asks us to believe that the industrial production that favoured the absence of ‘fannyin-about’ and instead celebrated the immediacy of the finish over the build-up (time is precious, get the job done) was somehow translated to the Sheffield United football team. We don’t believe it’s as simple as that, not least because the greatest post-war players loved by the Bramall Lane crowds were not labourers but virtuosos, the chief exemplars being Jimmy Hagan, Tony Currie and Iliman Ndiaye. And other cities or districts with mainly working-class supporters similarly favour the artists over the artisans: Everton FC is known as

'The School of Science', West Ham United FC as 'The Academy of Football'. The players the fans of these two clubs laud in memory were not 'fetchers and carriers' but craftsmen – Alan Ball, Colin Harvey and Howard Kendall at Everton, and Trevor Brooking, Alan Devonshire, Carlos Tevez and World Cup winners Bobby Moore, Martin Peters and Geoff Hurst at West Ham.

The 'working-class' ethos of Sheffield United is a philosophy the club's fans like to play along with. But how verifiable is this notion in reality? The traditional 'heartlands' from which United draw their support are indeed the city's 'working-class' districts of Heeley, Park, Darnall, the Manor, Wybourn, Woodthorpe, Handsworth, Woodhouse and others mainly in what we can loosely term central and south Sheffield and the former pit villages to the south-east. However, Wednesday also have plenty of supporters in these areas, albeit they have many more in the large council estates in the north of the city. Both clubs enjoy the patronage of many of Sheffield's wealthier citizens from the western suburbs. In this aspect United fans are not really any different from Wednesday's in leaning on or celebrating their supposed 'working-class' credentials. There is no social class 'thing' that explains football support for the two Sheffield clubs. And having a working class fanbase has not hindered many other clubs from winning a trophy.

Does the Bramall Lane stadium itself give us any clues in this debate? The authors have at various epochs of their lives populated the four sides of the ground on matchdays and have in one instance gone from the cheapest admission to the current most expensive mode of entry. The latter 'lounge' facility is not the preserve of the city's 'glitterati' and tycoons. It is instead a space for 'locals made good' and people who prefer to splash their cash on football as opposed to big cars and tropical holidays. Consider this a self-indulgence if you like; it is lifelong fans treating themselves to a level of comfort they have never before experienced at Bramall Lane. Most in the room on matchday once stood on the kop; their new method of viewing does not detract from their sense of belonging or indeed their 'Blade-ness'. They enter the ground and take their seat not *via* an exclusive car park, door and elevator, but share the same spaces with those paying 75 per cent less to enter and cheer (or boo). For the additional cost they get a more comfortable seat than the plastic ones elsewhere in the ground, pre-match food and drinks brought to their table, a bit of banter from a former player or two and clean and uncrowded toilet and washing facilities. Sheffield is something of a class-segregated city but Bramall Lane, whilst always having subtle gradations of 'taste and distinction', does not really promote any sense of exclusivity or exclusion.

The Object and the Passion

We can end with a consideration of Latour's notion of what the object can provide for a place and a people. Sheffield United fans also like to think they are in some way 'special'. For a start, given the proximity of Bramall Lane to the city centre they regard themselves as supporting the 'city' club, whereas – in their opinion – Sheffield Wednesday, playing at a ground some distance from the centre, represent the margins and the surrounding districts. It is no coincidence (the argument goes) that there are road signs on roundabouts on Sheffield's inner ring road directing drivers to both the "Heart of the City" and "Bramall Lane" – they are one and the same, according to Blades lore. Besides, the club's home

ground is not known as “Beautiful Down Town Bramall Lane” for nothing,²⁶ whilst the stadium’s status as the oldest professional football ground in the world also is a source of both pride and boast.

Furthermore, Blades fans are aware they support a historically underperforming club. They do this through thin and thinner, often taking a perverse delight in United’s relative ineptitude. For example, when United played multiple league, cup and European champions Liverpool in the Premier League in 2019 Blades fans responded to the visiting fans’ chant of “Champions of Europe” with “Champions of League One, you’ll never sing that!” United’s is in fact a fanbase that is forever looking back, as witnessed by many of the songs that dominate the chanting at away games, celebrating both the players and the more aggressive nature of football supporting of the 1970s. Most who sing these songs are too young to have seen these players in action or experienced rival fans fighting on the kop, but even the 20-somethings and teenagers have quickly learned what they have let themselves in for – a lifetime of supporting in which disappointment will be far more prevalent than joy. They also know that the laughs and the drinks and the scrapes of their day out with like-minded mates will usually be far more enjoyable than the match that is ostensibly the purpose of their journey. It is all retro, tongue-in-cheek, because we only have a past, and it was better than what they have in front of them at present.

At one level then Blades fans are special – who else would follow in such numbers an entity that never achieves what it was set up to do? But is there any quantifiable data to support such a sentiment of ‘specialness’? The most obvious evidential source is one of numbers – in other words match attendances. Blades fans old enough to recall would point to the 1981/82 season in Division Four as proof of their dedication and loyalty when the club was at its lowest ebb. There was however a ‘unique selling point’ provided by this particular season – the Fourth Division was a novelty and United won most weeks, both home and away, which was also somewhat novel. It was a constant ‘happy time’ for the fans watching a series of away victories whilst occupying town centres for several hours, entering small grounds often in a ‘well-oiled’ state and nearly always outnumbering the home support. Bramall Lane attendances were often remarkable too. On the evening of March 30th 1982 United played promotion rivals Bradford City at home. The attendance was 24,593. The same night Liverpool played Birmingham City in the old First Division. The Anfield attendance was 24,224, this in a season in which Liverpool won the league title. Moving forward 30 years, on the Premier League’s opening weekend in August 1992 Sheffield United played Manchester United at home. As well Brian Deane scoring the first-ever Premier League goal, the game attracted the new league’s highest attendance, 28,070.²⁷

Attendances tell stories: United’s average attendance that season was 14,892 – excellent by Fourth Division standards but many thousands below the level the club attracted in the First

²⁶ This term was coined in the late 1960s by stadium announcer and DJ Ian Ramsay and has been used in ‘Blades chat’ ever since, often in the abbreviated form of ‘BDTBL’.

²⁷ The other attendances were: Arsenal v Norwich City 24,030; Chelsea v Oldham Athletic 20,699; Crystal Palace v Blackburn Rovers 17,096; Everton v Sheffield Wednesday 27,647; Ipswich Town v Aston Villa 16,618; Leeds United v Wimbledon 26,795; Southampton v Tottenham Hotspur 19,654; Nottingham Forest v Liverpool 20,318; Manchester City v Queen’s Park Rangers 24,471.

Division a few years earlier. The Fourth Division average was not surpassed until the 1989/90 season when United won promotion to the First Division; the season average jumped to 19,988. The average attendance figure thereafter understandably fluctuated depending on which division the team was playing in, until promotion to the Premier League took the 2006/07 average attendance above 30,000 for the first time since 1971/72. Relegation to the Championship saw the figure drop to a still creditable mid 20,000s. Gates held up well even following a second relegation and six seasons in League One (17-22,000). Back in the Championship the average rose again to the high 20,000s, and two further Premier League seasons once again saw it rise above 30,000 (discounting the Covid-affected games from 2020 to 2021).

The Bramall Lane average attendance in both the 2019/20 and 2023/24 Premier League seasons was below 31,000. The Bramall Lane stadium capacity at the time was 32,050.²⁸ However, this 'full' figure can never be reached because some seats are always left unoccupied for crowd segregation purposes; nevertheless the ground rarely sells out. The number of away supporters who can attend is limited to around 2,900 in the lower tier of the Bramall Lane stand, albeit many Premier League clubs could sell two or three times this amount if more accommodation was available. What this perhaps tell us is that even if the Bramall Lane capacity increased to 40,000 it might only benefit the allocation of tickets for visiting supporters. Sheffield United's 'core support' might be estimated to stand at around 15,000, which can almost double when the club is in the Premier League. We can only speculate as to whether it would match the sudden large increases attained by clubs such as West Ham United, Sunderland and Tottenham Hotspur when they moved to their new stadiums.²⁹ In fact, Sheffield United's average crowds in recent years place the club at the same status as Wolverhampton Wanderers, Brighton and Hove Albion, Nottingham Forest, Leicester City, Southampton and Ipswich Town. Three of these clubs – Brighton, Southampton and Ipswich – are at the extremities of the country and have large 'hinterlands' with no other league football clubs from which to draw support. The other four – Sheffield United, Leicester, Forest and Wolves – are from inland provincial cities with several other league clubs within 30 miles. Sheffield United are thus a big club, but not that big and outside of the local region carry a minimal profile. Globally, few who speak a different mother tongue to English support the club.

There are occasions when Sheffield United's support can more than double: play-off finals or FA Cup semi-finals at Wembley can witness some 36,000 travelling. But we might – to our annoyance – contrast this with the 45,000 Sheffield Wednesday fans who attended Wembley for their 2023 League One play-off final. Wednesday, we believe, have a similar size 'core

²⁸ According to the Premier League. Other sources state attendance figures of variously; 31,884, 32,609 and 32,702.

²⁹ West Ham's average attendance in 2015/16, their last season at Upton Park, was 34,910. The average for their first season at the London Stadium was 56,972. Sunderland's average attendance in their last season at Roker Park (1996/97) was 20,865. The following season at the new Stadium of Light the average attendance was 33,492. Tottenham's average attendance in their last full season at White Hart Lane (2015/16) was 34,947. After over two seasons playing their home games at Wembley Stadium as their new stadium was being built, their average attendance in their first season (2019/20) at their new home was 59,607 (discounting Covid-affected games).

support' and demographic to United but can attract more 'floaters' when the going is good. And apart from some brief league and cup success in the early 1990s Wednesday too have consistently underachieved, being out of the Premier League since 2000 (and only twice being close to regaining that status) and spending several spells in League One. Whilst at that level their home and away support dwarfed that of any other club except – at different times – Sheffield United, Southampton, Sunderland, Derby County and Ipswich Town, all 'big' clubs fallen on hard times.

The old working-class clubs now in the doldrums might be reflective of some greater socio-political movements. Those at the top of the footballing tree in England are hardly working-class any more. The so-called 'Big Six' boast global support and one might argue have attracted a new middle class to their super-stadiums. The latter like to be associated with success and they attend – or watch from afar – to see their team win. Such clubs can, it seems, ride roughshod over financial regulation and buy whomever they want when it suits them. They can speculate a million or two on a 15-year-old from another club's academy and have willing partners across the globe seeking to push their protégés their way. They also have football agents beating down their doors offering the best of the world's footballing talent knowing they will pay a premium (and hence a better agent's percentage) than other clubs. The players themselves seem to favour the residential 'footballer belts' of Cheshire, the London peripheries and latterly rural Northumberland. Speaking as proud natives we know Sheffield has a lot going for it but getting that message across is not always easy when others with different financial interests are whispering in a prospective player's ear. A proud working-class heritage does not impress on all and the reality that the football club represents a deindustrialised city in the north of England does not carry much weight in the minds of promising 18-year-olds from South America or West Africa, or indeed South London. The 'hipster' value of Kelham Island and the proximity of the beautiful Peak District do not enter their consideration; money talks, whatever the age of the player.

Character Building

Is Blades supporters' desire for a certain 'style' of football something to do with what we might call the particular 'character' of Sheffielders? If so, just what does this embody? Despite (or perhaps because of) its working-class history and background, Sheffield has a reputation as a homely and friendly city. Writing for *GQ* magazine in 2019, journalist David Levesley attempted to capture what the 'Sheffield character' is like:

Sheffield's particular brand of northern kindness ... is worth the visit alone: never overly perky, it's a city of people who immediately behave as if they've been putting up with you for years. It's a subtle, gentle city. A warm hug that never judges you. This is a city that isn't trying to be London, it's just trying to be the best version of Sheffield imaginable.³⁰

This is a point well made. In contrast, a visitor to Manchester or Leeds gets the feeling that these cities *are* trying to be London, or at least trying to compete with it.

30 Source: <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/lifestyle/article/things-to-do-in-sheffield>

The tourism website www.welcometosheffield.co.uk postulated that the Sheffield's friendly nature "probably traces back to industrial times when [Trade] Unions in the city were like blood ties, and the sense of community was everything" and "more recently it's possibly to do with our badge of being 'The People's Republic of South Yorkshire', which stemmed from the left-wing leaning local politics and a stubborn, steadfast belief in doing things our own way."³¹ Meanwhile, Sheffield City Council, explaining its sponsorship of local campaigning and support group Voluntary Action Sheffield, remarked: "We need to celebrate the quiet heroes of Sheffield, those people living in our city who do great things to help others and make things happen without fuss: typical Sheffielders!"³²

But just what is a typical Sheffielder? According to academic Geoffrey Bullough, writing in 1974 about the inter-war period, they are "a hardheaded, materialistic race, yet kindly".³³ Some 250 years earlier the Earl of Oxford's chaplain said that Sheffielders were "an industrious and honest people".³⁴ In the 1960s Professor William Hampton, in a study of national electoral behaviour, opined that what he called the "typical Sheffield voter" was different from those in other parts of the country in that he or she was less likely to have ever travelled far from home, was less likely to have gone on to further education, was more likely to be a manual labourer, and was more likely to live in a council house or flat. Hampton concluded that Sheffield was "a self-contained city, whose people lived over long periods of time in the same house and who worked close by their home".³⁵ Meanwhile, Binfield *et al.* opined in 1993: "The horizons of the typical Sheffielder ... are probably still narrower than his or her counterparts in Britain's other major industrial centres. The city remains remarkably inward-looking for a place of its size."³⁶

So, a typical Sheffielder is kind and friendly, has an acute sense of community, does not venture far from where they were born, is hard-working and doesn't like to make a fuss or have a fuss made of them. Perhaps we could add that they are also humble, are not 'pushy' and spurn anyone or anything 'flash' or pretentious. Is Sheffield United FC therefore reflective of the city's populace, which is why the club has so successfully avoided success for a hundred years? If so, this would mean that Sheffield's 'character' somehow infuses itself – and always has done – into players, coaches and directors (who hail from elsewhere) so that they collectively underperform? This seems highly unlikely, but as a reader might have observed, we are turning all stones in our quest to find an answer.

There is no doubt that in the post-war period United were held back by both Bramall Lane's relative lack of seats and the fact that it was a three-sided ground because of the presence of cricket. From the early 1950s the club thus developed into one that was aware of its limitations, whose natural position seemed to be battling to get out of Division Two/the Championship and when in Division One/the Premier League it got out quickly, rather like unwelcome visitors who should not really be there. This complex has endured to the present

31 Source: <https://www.welcometosheffield.co.uk/living/city-culture/friendliness/>

32 Source: <https://www.vas.org.uk/make-a-difference-awards/our-supporters/>

33 Bullough (1974). *An English Repertory Theatre Between the Wars*.

34 Historical Manuscripts Commission (1901).

35 Hampton, X (1967). *The Sheffield Voter*.

36 Binfield *et al.* (Eds) (1993). *The History of the City of Sheffield 1843-1993, Volume II: Society*.

day; mere survival has always seemed to be the target, not becoming established in the Premier League, despite what various owners and chairman might have said to the contrary. Has there ever been optimism (amongst the board, the manager and the fans) around what the team and club might achieve? And what in the case of Sheffield United is perceived to be 'good enough'? What are we (again, the board, the manager and the fans) happy with? Does the club as a whole suffer too much from 'knowing its place' in relation to the aristocracy of football, *i.e.* Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool, Chelsea, Tottenham Hotspur and Arsenal, but then get outraged when the '*nouveau-riche*', such as Brighton, Bournemouth, Brentford and Fulham, and in the recent past Watford and Reading, come along and usurp the assumed natural football order?

Trust, Governance & Legitimacy

We may ask the question here as to whether there is any correlation between Sheffield's political history and Sheffield United's lack of success. As the title of this chapter suggests, both running a city and running a football club require varying degrees of trust, governance and legitimacy between respectively the electors/councillors and the supporters/directors. As mentioned earlier, Labour has controlled Sheffield City Council almost uninterrupted since the party first won a majority of seats in the 1920s. This period, of course, coincides precisely with Sheffield United's inability to win a trophy. However, any link between these two facts is surely entirely coincidental.

A more relevant point perhaps is whether or not any United directors in recent years have become overtly involved with politics or have proclaimed their political allegiance. Those who fall into these categories number very few. The first was Arthur Neal Liberal councillor and MP either side of the First World War. Following him from the 1920s to the 1950s were George Marlow and Ernest Graham, both Labour councillors. Then for a decade from the late 1960s another Labour councillor, Jim Sterland, was on United's board. These three individuals, plus one-time club chairman Alfred Cattell (Conservative) in 1917, all served as Lord Mayor of Sheffield, a ceremonial role with little or no political power.

Just one director since the 1970s – Reg Brealey, a Tory – has publicly divulged his party affiliations but he also sympathised with people who might not vote the same way as him, speaking of the role the club played in the life of both the local community and United's working-class supporters. He campaigned – ahead of his time – for fair treatment of football fans and openly declared his opposition to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's desire to introduce 'football identity cards'. Brealey encouraged United's players to visit factories and hospitals and connect with the 'common man', but at the same time took issue with the Socialist Sheffield City Council's contradictory political view, which he blamed for its rejection of his plan to redevelop Bramall Lane. However, those who came after Brealey into the boardroom always kept clear of party politics.

Brealey's early period in control of the club was also when two of Sheffield's most influential Labour councillors – David Blunkett and Clive Betts – were strident in their support of Sheffield Wednesday. Both later became Sheffield MPs. Another Wednesday fan, Roy Hattersley, was MP for Birmingham Sparkbrook from 1964 to 1997 and served as deputy

leader of the Labour Party from 1983 to 1992. Hattersley was balanced out in the House of Commons by United fan Richard Caborn, Labour MP for Sheffield Central from 1983 to 2010 and Minister for Sport from 2002 to 2007. Caborn was superseded by Paul Blomfield, if anything a more ardent 'Blade' than Caborn in that he held a season ticket for decades, even when his parliamentary duties prevented him from attending matches. Blomfield stood down as an MP in 2024. Returning to local politics, United supporter Jean Cromar was a Labour councillor for many years in the 1990s and 2000s and would often be seen at away matches. Today there are no Sheffield MPs or councillors who use their support of either of the city's two football clubs as a 'prop', never mind any who try to equate (or celebrate) football supporting and social class. It can be safely stated, then, that apart from a brief period in the early 1980s, politics (either local or national) has had little or no bearing on Sheffield United's fortunes.

The hard left were briefly dominant in municipal governance and Reg Brealey's belief that differing political ideologies derailed his redevelopment plans in 1983 may or not have been valid, but there is no doubt that the city's rulers at the time held an almost obsessive contempt for Margaret Thatcher and her Government's policies, which had ripped the heart out of the South Yorkshire region's traditional industries and would continue to do so for a number of years. Large areas of derelict and sometimes polluted land appeared as factories were closed and demolished. During this period Sheffield's unemployment rate rose from four per cent in 1978 to 15.5 per cent in 1984. Some figures might suffice here; in 1920 steel production in the area employed 120,000 people; in 1971 the number was 82,000. By 1986 the figure had fallen to 40,000 and by the late 1990s it was fewer than 10,000. The tens of thousands employed in coal mining in the early 1980s declined to under a thousand in just three collieries by the late 1990s. Overall, the percentage of the city's workforce employed in manufacturing fell from 50 per cent in 1971 to 24 per cent in 1984.³⁷ This cauldron of economic and social deprivation reinforced the city's anti-Tory sentiments.

That Sheffield City Council should initially seek to reverse its industrial decline by rebelling against 'Thatcherite' dogma was not a surprise. The council had a history of high spending on municipal projects dating back to the 1920s but was unprepared for the economic devastation of the early 1980s. With many private sector companies downsizing, closing down or leaving Sheffield, the council became by far the largest employer in the region. In 1976 some 22 of the 1,000 largest companies in Britain had headquarters in Sheffield; by 1987, just 13 remained. As a result, Sheffield's 21,000 public sector workers numbered some five times more than the largest private employer in the city, the Midland (later HSBC) Bank. The council decided to spend its way out of trouble: if market forces could not sustain the city's economy then the council's only option – it believed – was to step in. This was at odds with the ideology of the Tory Government, which embarked on a programme of regenerating British cities using private investment. The council attempted to counteract rising unemployment in 1981 by creating the Department for Employment and Economic Development (DEED), which sponsored the founding of small-scale businesses and created

37 Winkler, X (2007). *Sheffield City Report*.

the Cultural Industries Quarter . This was not a success, politically-loaded and narrowly focused the attractions folded 12 months later (see Moss 2010).

Collectivism and the End of Legitimacy

Perhaps partly because of the political and social upheaval of the past three decades, people today are less bound by the shared enthusiasms once evident in communal workplaces, organised religion and a once strong comprehension of neighbourhood. Football is important in this respect because the game provides for many of us the most frequent occasions for our feeling of collective happiness to emerge; little in contemporary life can compete with the celebration that ensues following our team scoring an important goal. In enjoying such football-related companionship we are essentially – in the myriad pre-match scenarios – enjoying the pursuit of the as yet unseen and unknown; such expectation and excitement provide for the escapism wherein private woes are dissipated somewhat for a couple of hours. It is at the match that our sense of self and the various ills that sense carries are conquered by the communal intensity of a shared passion that is at the same time angry, mocking, joyous and hilarious in its narratives.

For decades fans trusted that the clubs they supported would do their best in all senses of the word: that – like a local council – they would govern with integrity, live within their financial means and do right by higher authorities. Until the past two decades the clubs that constituted the English league system believed that fair play would always win out and that the game their club competed in was essentially a meritocracy; clubs were meant to grow organically, the best players were meant to be brought through a club's talent development system, those considered wrong-doers who won by underhand means and without ethical consideration were – we assumed – always treated the same by those who governed the game. No single club was bigger than the game and nobody was above the rules the governing bodies imposed to legitimatise their league and cup systems.

But things have changed in English football, and not for the better. Over the past 20 years the rich clubs have got richer *via* sometimes arguably unscrupulous investment, be it from billionaires and/or the sovereign wealth funds of nation states. The top clubs have become ego-trips for individuals or organisations seeking a global public profile and an adoring audience. Nations with questionable human rights records fund Premier League clubs and enjoy the association with subsequent footballing success. What has become known as 'sportswashing'³⁸ has developed into a controversial and increasing trend, despite the stubborn denials of those accused of such malfeasance. Here we can look with curiosity at one of the most recent clubs to enter this murky world: Newcastle United, whose supporters sublimated their self-proclaimed 'Geordie Nation' to the petro-dollar, seeking footballing salvation in ownership by the Public Investment Fund (the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia) and US hedge fund finance. A decade ago their fans were demonstrating against

38 'Sportswashing' is the practice of nations, individuals, groups, corporations or governments using sport to improve reputations tarnished by wrongdoing. This objective can be achieved by hosting sporting events, purchasing sports clubs or sponsoring competitions.

increasing ticket prices;³⁹ now they were giddy on corporate wealth – wherever it came from and whoever it harmed.

Football's governing authorities chase the changes but remain in the slipstream, seemingly impotent to impose the 'Financial Fair Play' regulations all clubs are supposed to abide by. In response, the elite clubs employ expensively-hired lawyers and public relations agencies to conceal bad news in order to sustain corporate reputations and help them concomitantly evade the rules that were meant to ensure – an admittedly vague – sense of fair play. The game's headlines now compete between stories of footballing ability, hysterical reactions to VAR and the exposure of the nefarious practices of offshore accounts, mysterious financial partnerships and payments to players and player agents that do not quite add up. There is little-to-no trust in those employed to regulate the game that they are able to do so. This could be very consequential and Sheffield United fans enduring the 2023/24 season were active on social media and in pub conversations articulating what we believe millions of other fans were feeling. Inside the Bramall Lane ground on matchdays the fans sang in unison – hopefully so that television viewers could hear – “Premier League, corrupt as fuck!” as they perceived the ‘bigger’ team United were playing were receiving the smooth end of any 50:50 or game-changing on-field or VAR decisions. But of course such an attitude is somewhat disingenuous: Sheffield United fans do not hate the Premier League (in fact they spend every season in the Championship longing to get there); they just hate being unable to adequately compete in it. And it must not be forgotten that during the six seasons spent in League One United were the ‘big fish’, paying the highest wages. Fans of other clubs might have believed that all the close decisions went United's way.

The English game at the elite level is out of control. Governance is the problem. The biggest and richest are running the show for themselves. The Premier League is *de facto* three divisions in one, comprising the top six, the bottom six and a squeezed middle. This intermediate zone consists of clubs that seem to know their place and plod on, making up the numbers for the more exciting contests at the top and bottom. Meanwhile this category can only hope to win one of the two cup competitions despite them often fielding weakened teams in the early stages of the competition in order to rest key players to make sure they do not slip into that six-club ‘cellar’ and face the prospect of life without EPL monies. Legitimacy is becoming critical. What happens when those who live within their means and operate with integrity face a future of never winning anything? The sense of footballing credibility that anyone just might win one day is challenged. The issue is; whom might we trust to challenge this state of affairs? We will not all become fans of the ‘Big Six’; another 1,750 or so clubs exist in the 100-plus leagues in the 11 tiers of the FA's ‘pyramid system’ and sustain the game from the ground up.⁴⁰ Whatever the outcome of their matches and their seasons, Sheffield United FC will continue to be a going concern and whilst not likely to lift a trophy in our lifetimes remind both its fans and the fans of all other clubs that winning isn't everything.

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39 Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/34435999>

40 Source: https://www.myfootballfacts.com/england_footy/football-league/english-football-pyramid-system/

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