

Paying the price? Why football still has a problem

Mike Rowe and Jon Garland assess the ongoing presence of racism in football



Several high profile incidents have ensured that the problem of racism in football, widely perceived to have been in abeyance in recent years, has been a continuing focus of media and political attention. On-field confrontations between Premiership players John Terry and Anton Ferdinand, and between Luis Suarez and Patrice Evra, and claims of racist chanting at various grounds, raise questions about the long-term impact of a series of anti-racism campaigns and legal and regulatory interventions. In many respects, incidents of inter-player racist abuse and public displays of racism have been more notable in the last year or so precisely because they were problems that – like football hooliganism – had been perceived by many to have been largely resolved. This article will assess whether this really is the case within English football and will suggest that, while substantial progress has been made in challenging some forms of racism, there are still many challenges facing those campaigning against racism within the game.

Back to the future

Nowadays clashes between elite sportsmen are the subject of exhaustive media scrutiny: footage of events is replayed, frame by frame, in the context of a 24/7 media environment that has transformed top-level footballers into A-list celebrities. In these circumstances

it is unsurprising that the language apparently used by players accused of racism has been subject to extended examination. Significantly, though, linguistic analysis of what was said, and about what words and phrases mean, have predominated, relative to arguments about whether the use of racist epithets are acceptable. A decade or so

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ago, a common stance was that racist abuse on the pitch was part of the game: the heat of the sporting moment rendered words and phrases less heinous than they might be in other contexts. When the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) President, Sepp Blatter, recently stated that racist abuse on the pitch ought to be settled by a post-match handshake, his comments were widely reported as evidence that he was out of touch with contemporary mores. The repercussions of the Terry case further illustrate a shift in attitudes toward racism in the game. In the light of the decision to prosecute Terry for the alleged racist abuse of Ferdinand, the Football Association announced that he was to lose his position as England captain. The manner in which that

decision was handled was widely reported to have prompted the resignation of England manager

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Fabio Capello. The interim replacement for Capello was Stuart Pearce, who was already established as coach of the under-21 national side. The media furore over Terry's alleged racism may be considered justifiable or otherwise, but

it stands in stark contrast to the almost complete media silence in relation to Pearce's self-confessed history of such abuse. In his 2001 autobiography Pearce admitted that he had directed racist abuse at Paul Ince during a particularly fractious mid-90s clash between their club sides Nottingham Forest and Manchester United. Neither at the time of that incident, nor when he was appointed temporary England manager (as the indirect result of another player being alleged to have behaved in a similar manner) was Pearce's behaviour subject to much media comment or attention from police or football authorities.

While it is difficult to make direct comparison between different instances of alleged racist abuse, it might be argued that the apparent decline in tolerance of such abuse in the context of football matches demonstrates that the measures introduced in the last two decades have had some success. That Terry be investigated and prosecuted for

behaviour that was largely ignored in the days of Pearce (and countless others) can be considered progress. Racism has been successfully criminalised in this context and this reflects a significant cultural and social movement.

However, and notwithstanding this progress, manifestations of overt racism (such as the chants directed at Leicester City supporters by those of Nottingham Forest during their FA Cup game in 2011/12) are still evident at football matches in England. The nature of this racism may have changed, in that it may more often be directed against those of a perceived Muslim or Gypsy Traveller background rather than specifically against black players (as was the case in previous decades), but it is still evident. In addition, new forms of social networking media, such as Facebook or Twitter, have offered a fresh platform for the racist harassment of minority ethnic players and supporters, with ex-professional Stan Collymore just one example of someone being the recipient of allegedly racist tweets from football fans.

The persistence of racism

There are a number of reasons why racism has persisted in football. Firstly, it is a truism to note that the problem of racism in the sport reflects broader social and political developments. Although this observation has often been cited as a poor excuse for inaction, it remains the case that football is a distorted reflection of wider society and issues of rising tensions between communities will often manifest

themselves in malicious chanting on match days.

Secondly, the success of the English Defence League (EDL) in rapidly establishing itself as an organisation capable of regularly mobilising over a thousand supporters to its rallies against 'Islamic extremism' may also have impacted on the levels of racism at football matches. Much of the EDL's core support originates from within a number of football hooligan 'crews' from all over England who can put aside their inter-club rivalries in order to unite together on EDL marches. The high media profile enjoyed by the organisation in the last couple of years may well have emboldened its followers into believing that they can get away with racist abuse and harassment in another context; that of the football stadium.

Thirdly, it may be the case that the football industry has become complacent about the issue, feeling that racism in football has been successfully tackled when in fact it has merely been driven 'underground'. Indeed, perhaps all that has been achieved by such high profile national campaigns such as Kick It Out is to make overt displays of racism within stadia more unacceptable than they used to be. This is no mean feat, of course, and is to be applauded, but it might be the case that such views now just remain hidden from public earshot as those that are minded to express them are concerned that they may feel the disapprobation of their fellow fans if they do. Thus the manifestations of the disease may

have been tackled but the root causes still remain.

Lack of commitment

Lastly, it may be the case that campaigns against racism in football can only achieve a limited amount, and that such campaigns really needed to have been fully embraced by clubs in order to make them successful. Worryingly, the lack of true commitment on behalf of many clubs in this regard may be both a cause and a symptom of the continued existence of institutional racism within the sport. The fact that there are currently only three black managers amongst the 92 league clubs may be testimony to this while the suing of his former club Gillingham for racial discrimination by black striker Mark McCammon in 2012 may just be the tip of the iceberg of such cases. Also, the seemingly unconditional backing initially given by the management and players of Liverpool FC to Luis Suarez, even after he was found guilty by the Football Association of racially abusing Patrice Evra, is surely also cause for concern. That Evra, brave enough to officially complain about this abuse in the first place, was subject to vilification and bile from Liverpool fans when his club side next played Liverpool at their Anfield home was a damning indictment of the lack of progress football has made. If the industry has not yet created the environment in which players that are victims of racist abuse can report the abuse without subsequently being the subject of even more harassment, then it still has a long way to go before it can say that it has fully confronted racism in the game. ■

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