

« All that I know most surely about morality and obligations,
I owe to football»

Football v. Philosophy: A game with several halves

By Stefan Howald

Football 1

I wasn't there when my team suffered its heaviest defeat. Having started the game with eight men, Philosophy Football went one-nil up but then fell some goals behind. When the referee showed the red card to one of the eight brave men, it proved possible to persuade him to change it to a yellow one, otherwise the game would have had to be abandoned because of an understaffed PF-team; which would have been better because the game ended 1:18.

I was there, however, on a grey Sunday in October 2000, when we lost 0:11, against a team of the Crown Prosecution Service, lawyers, stay-at-offices, twisters of the law.

Incomprehensible, humiliating. Now, barely two years later, we have won the Championship of the Grafton Millennium League (South London), unbeaten, with 12 wins and 2 draws, and a goal average of 58 to 17.

Philosophy 1

The first t-shirt, with which Philosophy Football was founded, displayed a quote by Albert Camus: «All that I know most surely about morality and obligations, I owe to football.» In this project, Mark, Hugh and Geoff tried to combine football and culture. This was in 1995. After the gloomy 1980s, with the hooliganism and the dead in Brussels and Sheffield, English football took an upturn at the beginning of the 1990s, becoming topical in several in-scenes, ennobled in literature by Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, a book which I, in 1994, offered to two German publishers to translate, both of whom declined, to their own loss.

Philosophy Football organised two festivals in London: one in 1996, to coincide with the European Championship in England, and the second in 1998 during the World Cup in France,

with literature and discussions, music and films, quizzes and a fashion show. For the first time, football entered the hallowed halls of the South Bank Centre, and on the marble floors of the Royal Festival Hall we staged a five-a-side-tournament in which we played for five minutes alongside Graham Kelly, CEO of the English FA. The festival was new, refreshing and successful. The second one, in 1998, generated a very impressive encounter with George Weah of Liberia, World Footballer of the Year, in support of Unicef. This time, however, there was the faint whiff of repetition in the air and the hunch that the cultural enhancement of football might have met its limits.

To match its theory with practice, at the end of 1995 a PF-football team was started, but our claim of bringing philosophy on to the pitch soon ran into an offside position. For a few years we eked out an existence of sorts in an obscure league on an obscure pitch in East London until, in 1999, Geoff decided to re-start the team. From then on, we stumbled forward, with some setbacks as in October 2000; last year, we secured third place in a new Sunday league, and this season we have been crowned as champions.

Philosophy Football, in the meantime, works with a division of labour. Hugh designs the hundred-odd different shirts which are sold through a successful, non-profit mail order business. Mark teaches the sociology of football at a university, writes pamphlets on football for a think tank and sits on quasi-official committees concerning sport. Geoff concentrates on managing the team, with ever-increasing Italian influence, as his work as a lecturer in politics consists not only in studying Italian politics but Italian culture as well.

Football 2

We play our home games at Regent's Park. A dozen pitches are laid criss-crossing the Royal Park, near to the Zoo, and sometimes I think I can hear a howling wolf or some screaming apes commenting on my feats. English rain leads occasionally to waterlogged fields, so quite a few communal pitches are made of Astroturf, a true Anglo-American invention: an artificial surface with sand spread on top of it that leads to second-degree-burns which have to be dealt with by my long-suffering partner with a special *grappa* from Southern Switzerland.

Some of the sports complexes show the growing contrast between private wealth and crumbling public infrastructure. Our away games take place in South London, in Crystal

Palace or Merton or even further south, in areas which are beyond the limits of the A-Z, and we sometimes feel like the ancient adventurers sailing through the straits of Gibraltar and over the edge of the world. On Sunday mornings, dew lies on the meadows of Surrey and a pale sun tries to pierce through the morning mist. Nearby, a cricket game is in slow progress, with strangled cries and the crack of leather on willow, watched by a man and his dog. The football pitch is a mellow hollow, a kind of bowl, in which one feels strangely comforted, even if one has to play against the slope in the second half. In another leafy suburb, auntie BBC keeps a pitch where, after the game, sandwiches are being served, in neat triangles, with soft, white, insipid bread.

Philosophy 2

After 90 minutes of London rain one has to tiptoe through the mud from the changing room to the shower and back. Filippo, our Italian inspiration, has declared that flip-flops are a symbol of a wider *kulturkampf*, and some of us have followed suit – though drawing the line at using a fluffy bathrobe.

Sarah, as a children's nurse accustomed to some suffering, endured wind and rain during the whole season on the sideline. But such laudable English stoicism can sometimes oscillate towards fatalism. My partner, Renée, and I still remember when the man painting our house, started, one midday with the sun blazing down, to eat his lunch in his car outside our front door, windows tightly shut, and we had to drag him to our table in the garden. And I still remember one game in Wimbledon, when torrential rain created little lakes in the middle of the pitch and in the goalmouth area; Swiss Andi and I urgently wanted to go home but were overruled by the English; when I was put through and tried to shoot, I lost my footing and fell into the puddle, nearly drowning.

«Unlucky», my colleagues assure me in such situations. «No, incompetent», I murmur, supported by Filippo who has turned the unlucky obsession of the English with «unlucky» into a running gag. Does not the fairness and the noble-minded restraint of the word smack faintly of snobbery? On the other hand, in a novel by a Scottish author which I have translated, the word gets a socially different meaning, when a boy from a more prosperous family objects to the fact that his companion with a poorer background apologetically

absolves the mistakes of his luckier friend in a game of golf by telling him he is unlucky in his swing.

Football 3

When re-building our team three years ago, some new players showed for training sessions. One of them, Tim A., enjoyed, so the rumour went, the confidence of Prime Minister Tony Blair, or at least the confidence of Blair's press secretary. On the pitch, he assumed control from the first moment, although his own performance didn't always match his verbal instructions. But that, surely, was the fault of us other players. After two friendly games he found more rewarding leisure activities. Shortly afterwards, he could be seen occasionally on TV, carrying a briefcase as a member of one of Tony Blair's innumerable quangos, until he seamlessly switched sides and started working for Rupert Murdoch. And just recently, as I read in my newspaper, a lawyer uttered on his behalf a warning to the BBC, that a planned docusoap about three social climbers from New Labour might be defamatory in tailoring too much to his well-maintained features.

Another new player glittered with filigree as well as muscular play. We only knew that Sola was some kind of session musician. One Sunday he declared that he might no longer be available for the coming weeks due to a tour. Touring the English seaside towns, one jested, and what might the name of his group be? Sola murmured something about a group beginning with J. Jamiroquai, surmised our jester whose taste in music is fairly middle of the road, and Sola confirmed the name, to some laughter. Until we established in the following week that Sola, indeed, played percussions with Jamiroquai whose latest single had just secured another Number 1 hit in the UK. We wanted to cheer Sola when Jamiroquai played on «Later with Jools», but were informed that the audience was fully booked in advance for two years. So we cheered Sola on the screen, as, dressed in his filigreed white robe, he worked with muscular grace on his percussion. Meanwhile he has sent us some e-mails from Jamiroquai's world tour, assuring us that he misses the occasional Sunday game.

Philosophy 3

Philosophy Football FC's claim to an alternative approach is taken with differing degrees of seriousness. Alan and Raj, our midfield duo, represent various polarities which co-exist in

true English pluralist fashion. They have been christened Crease and Crumple, because one of them is always in a freshly ironed shirt, with a neat parting and is fairly punctual, whereas the other is somewhat the opposite. Even their style of play resembles their respective images, with subtle runs on the one side and relentless tackles on the other. Both of them are lawyers, with different status in accordance with the English class system: one is a barrister, having the right of representing any client in court, fully decked with robe and wig; the other is a solicitor, restricted to cases which are instructed by a barrister for whom he normally does the hard work.

In May, Raj stood as a Labour candidate for election to the local council in Camden. This not only posed some ideological difficulties to Alan but also to some of us from the other wing to whom New Labour has become barely eligible, not even as the lesser of two evils. Nevertheless, we took part in a tournament Raj organised to promote his candidacy. The use of the pitches at the communal playground had to be negotiated with a posse of locals, and the tournament was won by a bunch of 16- to 18-year-old Somalians, who wound their way through all overweight opponents. We concentrated on one game, against the local Labour team – identified by our manager as typical apparatchiks of the new generation – which we managed to beat 4:0, so saving our day. Two weeks later, Raj held on to the Labour seat: being the right choice.

Mark has found his own brand of political relations. He follows, sometimes in an official capacity, the English national team, staying with buyers of PF-shirts from Albania to Japan, and enthuses about an Internationale of PF football fans. On the other hand, he tries to give 'Ingerland' a new progressive identity and to rescue the St George cross from chauvinistic misuse; a strategy which not only Geoff, who is Welsh, but I too eye with some reservations. Recently, travelling with an English package holiday to Menorca, I encountered several holiday resorts which were covered in huge English flags; I still wonder how one could turn the fact that some members of a nation feel inclined to take bath towels in the colours of national flags on holidays into a progressive quest.

Football 4

The harsh times are behind us, when we started a game with seven people and had to recruit players from the sideline or when we got caught in a violent brawl where racism reared its

ugly head; and it is very seldom indeed that one of my colleagues reminds me how I objected to a penalty which was awarded to me. But some harsh words are still out there on the pitch. When I am confronted with a defender who embellishes his Surrey slang with many four-letter-words and some homophobic jokes, my middle class education causes me to resort to irony, which falls flat onto the pitch.

The start of our improvement dates back to a trip to Zürich where we, somewhat depleted and disorganised, lost 4:0 to FC Levante Wibi of the Progressive Swiss Football Championship, founded in the 1970s. But this first contact with continental Europe energized us; a following trip to Rome, with a game against Italian sport journalists on the training pitch of the Italian national team became a triumph, as is true of a tournament in a small village in the South of France where our team only got into difficulties when asked to respond to the splendid singing display of the French hosts.

After that, a trip to Prague led into Kafkaesque adventures, but in autumn 2001, we could take revenge on FC Levante from Switzerland, with English hospitality as well as on the pitch where we won 4:1. In September we will continue our glorious tradition with a trip to Brussels and a game against a team from the European Commission.

Philosophy 4

It was a long time before influences from continental Europe were accepted in English football. During the last five years they have become all the more important. Ruud Gullit, Gianluca Vialli, Claudio Ranieri, Gérard Houllier and Arsène Wenger have established themselves with moderate or excellent success as managers. And then there is Sven-Göran Eriksson.

The Swedish coach of the English national team is still a star. During the 2002 World Cup he acted in a TV commercial with Jamie Oliver, a young English chef and star of a new cooking culture, which tries to compensate for a restricted domestic tradition with a boom of publicly celebrated cooking. The advertisement confirmed stereotypes in order to play with them, or it played with them in order to confirm them. While Oliver is cooking and incessantly talking, Eriksson sits at the table and, using some kitchen utensils, quietly and profoundly probes a new formation for his team. In a second commercial, Italian tomato sauce is delivered to him

with the comment «saucy», which Eriksson acknowledges with a raised eyebrow: an ironic reference to his supposed fling with a blonde TV presenter which was the talk of the country just before the World Cup.

The relationship between England and sex is an ongoing mystery. The highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Europe and the most uninhibited sex-and-booze-holidays to the Mediterranean and the Canaries go hand in hand with public priggishness and censorship and an aggressive-repressive tabloid press.

Football 5

The season 2001/2002 started successful, albeit not too spectacular, with one narrow and one more clear-cut win, and then another hard-fought 1:0 win against Inter Aztec. This team trashed all opponents in the following matches and led the table, because we lost two points when drawing once and lagging behind because of games which had to be postponed. So, in March, the Titans clashed again. Last year, against the same team, we were 4:0 in front, when Inter Aztec-players started to intimidate a not very experienced referee so that we, unintentionally restraining ourselves, lost 5:6. This time we were trailing 0:3 after 20 minutes and the opponents were already signalling to each other how this would be easy. But then Brian, our central defender, scored with a header from a corner. Encouraged we drew level by half-time and shortly afterwards we went in front. Inter Aztec on their part managed to draw level; but in the 75th minute, I, dribbling, falling, scored, and five minutes from time, Marco, playing with a badly bruised shoulder, harassed the opponent's central defender so that he steered the ball into his own goal. Until the end of the season, we only lost two further points with a draw and won the league convincingly.

Philosophy 5

After our games, I am still baffled by the endless debates in the pubs, as my ability to analyse a game runs out after about 15 minutes. My British colleagues might stem from all over the country, but they are united in their steadfast solidarity to the football club of their youth, being able to quote every player and result since World War II. But for me the quiz at the annual get-together, which always includes, as a friendly gesture, a question about Switzerland, is a source of renewed pain and shame, as am I not even able to recount the most

recent results of *FC Zürich*, and as Renée only followed the disgrace of once mighty *FC Sitten* from afar with a faint shudder.

English fans still have the image of hooligans, but this is mostly a feature of away games. In England, the incidents have been reduced; indeed, racist chants which can be heard from fans of *Lazio Roma* or *1860 München* would no longer be tolerated from English fans. If the spectators are getting more orderly, the players, on the other hand, are getting more aggressive. Quite a few players have featured in court in recent years, charged with indecent behaviour, violence and GBI, mostly in connection with alcohol. Alcohol has always been attached to football. George Best, the first pop star of football history, has just received a new liver. Since his heyday, with even more money and fame on offer, traditions have become even more muddled, and younger players are becoming mindless and confused.

So, culture is still necessary. Even in football.