

“MORE THAN A GAME: THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND TRIBALISM IN FOOTBALL CLUBS”

“More Than A Game: The Psychology Behind Tribalism in Football Clubs,” is an anonymous essay from a blog associated with the clothing brand *Suave and Debonair*. Published on April 17, 2024, the essay delves into the psychological and social factors that drive intense loyalty and rivalry among British soccer fans. By examining how identity, community, and competition shape fandom, the authors provide insights into the phenomenon of *football hooliganism*. The essay is inspired by the book *The Soccer Tribe* (1982) by Desmond Morris.

If you have ever sat in the stands at a proper football match then you will very likely have experienced something unlike anything else. Sure there is cheering, celebration following a great goal, etc. But I’m talking about something else. Something more disturbing – darker if you like.

Football is tribal. fans are passionate about their team and in many cases hostile to the opposition. There is something about the terraces on a Saturday that can turn even the most mild-mannered middle-aged father of 3 into a yob. That is to say, something happens when perfectly respectable people attend a football match – they can turn into aggressive, unpleasant people with no regard for the normal social rules within which they operate.

I mean, take Jeff for example. Likely a teacher, wears a tweed jacket with those leather patches on the elbows. Spends his week being the epitome of decency, control and politeness but come Saturday at about 3:11pm he is standing up in front of 10,000 people and shouting at a footballer 30 metres away that he is a “useless a***hole” or something similar.

It’s not just opposition footballers either – it’s his own team, their manager, the opposition fans or worst of all... The referee.

Abuse at matches, individual and group chanting, swearing and mob mentality can make football stadiums intimidating and unpleasant places to be.

So what is it about that arena that seems to bring out the thug in some people. Is it an inevitable consequence of a world obsessed with political correctness that suffocates and cajoles people into behaving in such a restrained way that some outlet is a necessary evil?

Is it the fierce competition of football that makes people think all is fair during the match and so it is the fans responsibility to make their stadium a so-called “difficult place for away teams to go” – do we accept “hostile” behaviour for away teams as part of the competition? Do fans feel they have a responsibility to “get after them” – is pressure on the referee a subconscious strategic attempt at gaining an advantage?

Now don’t get me wrong, many many fans go to football games and behave perfectly normally, managing to avoid the use of abusive language or suggesting in no uncertain terms that the referee can’t do his job. But it remains the case that in every one of the professional football matches played up and down the UK on a Saturday there will be countless examples of the type of abrasive and aggressive behaviour I am talking about here.

It is said that football fans have a deeper-rooted culture than most other sports. Team allegiance is often passed down through generations creating this enhance sense of belonging and perhaps at least partly responsible for a heightened response to the ebb and flow of a match.

The stakes are high also – winning and losing, promotion and relegation can have a direct impact on the financial landscape around the local club.

Some say that football fans are historically from low social-economic households and as a result will have lower levels of education therefore inevitably leading to lower types of social behaviour and increased levels of aggression – but that seems like too simple an explanation, not to mention outdated for a world where the class system is a really a thing of yesterday.

One particularly extreme type of tribalism is of course football hooliganism, which itself comes in several forms. Pitch invading, player “attacks”, significant unrest in the stands and even stadium invasions like we witnessed at the final of Euro 2020 at Wembley.

Interestingly, individual clubs and even countries seem to get labelled as being aggressive. Millwall and Leeds United for instance – both have

a big reputation as having disruptive fans and as a result trigger higher levels of police presence wherever they go to an away ground. The Italians are known to be at a higher risk of physical altercations and violence when British clubs pay a visit. It begs the question do some clubs attract and retain a greater level of this “tribalism” than others and if so why?

So let’s look at the actual psychology behind all this.

A strong example of group identification, feeling of belongingness and loyalty is the passion for a football team, which may therefore be viewed as sort of tribal love. Desmond Morris described in an impactful book this tribal character of the link between, not only football players, coaches and directors, but between the fans and the teams. Football was described as a tribal phenomenon and the author framed in an evolutionary view how the attachment for a preferred football team and nation has achieved such significance for very large audiences (Morris, 1981). The cognitive neuroscience of fan binding to a team is poorly studied from the neuro-imaging point of view. Nevertheless, its social importance is irrefutable and the phenomenon of team love is worth deeper scientific investigation.

When it comes to the more extreme side, Dr Hutter described a state of deindividuation, where we behave as an anonymous member of a group rather than an individual – likely a contributing factor to why individuals who would not act in a violent manner on their own, can in some cases do so when they feel part of a larger group.

When all is said and done, we love our football teams. “Our team” can form part of our identity. People get the team logo tattooed, buy replica shirts, even name their children after their favourite players. The joy so many people get from watching, following, debating and celebrating their football team is a precious and beautiful thing.

Next time you go to a match look for the individuals that are clearly quiet, polite and respectable people outside of the ground and see how they lean into their natural aggressive tribal instincts when it comes to “their club” – watch them as they berate the match officials and threaten the opposition.

It’s nature, modern man in a rarely seen raw and unfiltered moment – one that will quickly pass when the final whistle goes.