

# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SPORTS FAN

by Tim Welland



The power of football clubs in the United Kingdom – particularly in the English Premier League – and the positive influence that they can wield on their respective communities is enormous, and their duty of care to those communities is more critical today than it ever has been.

After Liverpool’s 3-1 away win over Brighton & Hove Albion in July 2020, a listener called in to Kelly Cates’ BBC Radio 5 live Sport show to say that armchair fans having the ability to hear players talking during the game, due to empty stadia, is one of those added bonuses that you don’t expect. The caller, Graeme, particularly enjoyed it when he heard Virgil van Dijk say “Love it, Joey!” after fellow Liverpool defender Joe Gomez made a vital tackle, and also when Jordan Henderson screamed “Mo!” three times to Salah for not passing the ball, with the Egyptian pretending not to hear him. Cates, the daughter of Reds’ legend, Sir Kenny Dalglish, described what she saw as “a new way of watching football” and how “you feel like you’re being let inside a little bit.”

The following morning, I woke up to the news that the 43rd Ryder Cup had been postponed until September 2021 – unsurprising, as it had been rumoured for weeks. Without question, the COVID-19 pandemic played a major part in its postponement; but it was the absence of the boisterously tribal European and American fans, who are synonymous with the 93-year-old golf competition, which would have ultimately decided its fate. For the large majority, a Ryder Cup behind closed doors, without fans, was unthinkable, an impossibility.

While it will undoubtedly be temporary, how sustainable is this new normal way of sports fandom, and what will the short- and long-term knock-on effects be? Can live sport survive without fans and, conversely, will fans survive without live sport? As and when normality does resume, will fans rush back without a second thought (our recent research suggests not), or will allegiances have waned, perhaps tinged with a touch of cynicism?



We're in uncharted waters, so it's difficult for me to answer the majority of these questions with any level of confidence; however, I do believe that many top-flight clubs will be forced to rethink their strategies when it comes to their supporters, which, up until now, have been somewhat one-dimensional, as some of the comments by these Guardian readers go to show.

Fans are vital to each and every sport, to their clubs and competitions, however large or small. Fans are the lifeblood of sport, and it would be remiss of me to argue that one sport's fans are more important than another's. At a national level, however, when it comes to fan loyalty, some clubs just get things right, and none more so in the Premier League than Leicester City. Free pies, pints and beanie hats for Foxes' fans, as a thank you for their unwavering support; 75 hotel rooms for fans stranded in Calais by a storm; free pints for visiting Watford fans, who unveiled a banner which read, "Thank you Vichai for allowing us all to dream. Rest in Peace", after the club's Thai owner's tragic death. In times of adversity, these kind gestures by clubs will be remembered by fans and will go an awfully long way to securing lucrative season ticket sales, as and when supporters are allowed back into stadia. But even then, is the pre-COVID-19 fan necessarily going to have the disposable income

and willingness to justify spending £891 on a season ticket, which is what Arsenal was commanding for the 2019/20 Premier League season?

A die-hard fan's allegiance doesn't stop once he or she has bought their season ticket; there's the travel costs to and from the grounds (home and away), the annual club shirt, food and drink, matchday programme, TV subscriptions. Incurring those expenses once, sometimes twice a week over the course of a nine-month season isn't cheap, with a 2019 report by KPMG estimating that Premier League match-going fans would spend an estimated and colossal £1.3bn in the 2019/20 season. But for many fans, supporting their beloved club is their life, the be-all and end-all, and the financial cost will pale into insignificance. The period between the Premier League curtain-raiser in August to the final game in May gives some a much-needed routine; others a way to escape the trials and tribulations of everyday life; and many the weekly chance to collectively share the highs and lows with fellow club supporters, which will create a real sense of community, togetherness, belonging and self-worth. Live sport is a lifeline for many, a way to identify and connect with people who genuinely understand one another, but for the time being that's been cruelly put on hold.

Admittedly, the majority of fans will have found ways of coping and adapting, either by being fortunate enough to have strong friendship networks or families, other interests and hobbies, or by just being sound of mind. But for a minority, without this togetherness and routine, and the natural highs that come with many elements of the matchday experience, they will understandably feel bereft, and I have no doubt that this sense of loss, combined with social distancing, quarantining and lockdown, will manifest itself in some pretty sinister ways, with ill mental health a very real consequence.

It's comforting, then, to hear about initiatives that have been rolled-out, such as [Aberdeen FC's NHS-approved Thrive app](#), which offers tips and techniques to manage and improve mental wellbeing, and has now been accessed for free by more than 10,000 Dons' supporters. The club recognised an issue, empathised with its supporters, and felt compelled to do something about it, for free – so brilliantly simple and at the same time incredibly compassionate. As with Leicester City, this thoughtful act will be remembered by Aberdeen's fans for many, many years to come.

Do all clubs have a responsibility and moral obligation to look after their supporters in the community like this? I honestly think they do and [many Premier League clubs have rolled-out some highly commendable programmes](#), as a result of the [COVID-19 situation](#). But the current situation presents a perfect opportunity for clubs and their partners to sit up, take stock and realise the true worth of supporters, and give even more back to their fans once normality resumes. And I'm not just talking clubs using some of their monumental turnovers to freeze season ticket prices and subsidise matchday tickets or treat fans to the odd free pie or pint or beanie – that should be a given.

