



The Game of Our Lives: The English Premier League and the Making of Modern Britain

David Goldblatt

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The Game of Our Lives is a masterly portrait of soccer and contemporary Britain. Soccer in the United Kingdom has evolved from a jaded, working-class tradition to a sport at the heart of popular culture, from an economic mess to a booming entertainment industry that has conquered the world. The changes in the game, David Goldblatt shows, uncannily mirror the evolution of British society.

In the 1980s, soccer was described as a slum game played by slum people in slum stadiums. Such was the transformation over the following twenty-five years that novelists, politicians, poets, and bankers were all declaring their footballing loyalties. At one point, the Palace let it be known that the queen—like her mother, Prince Harry, the chief rabbi, and the archbishop of Canterbury—was an Arsenal fan. Soccer permeated the national life like little else, an atavistic survivor decked out in New Britain flash, a social democratic game in a cutthroat, profit-driven world.

From the goals, to the players, to the managers, to the money, Goldblatt describes how the English Premier League (EPL) was forged in Margaret Thatcher's Britain by an alliance of the big clubs—Arsenal, Liverpool, Manchester United, Chelsea, Tottenham Hotspur—the Football Association, and Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV. Goldblatt argues that no social phenomenon traces the momentous economic, social, and political changes of post-Thatcherite Britain in a more illuminating manner than soccer, and *The Game of Our Lives* provides the definitive social history of the EPL—the most popular soccer league in the world.

The Game of Our Lives: The English Premier League and the Making of Modern Britain Details

Date : Published November 11th 2014 by Nation Books (first published January 1st 2014)

ISBN : 9781568585062

Author : David Goldblatt

Format : Hardcover 368 pages

Genre : Sports and Games, Sports, Football, Soccer, Nonfiction, History, European Literature, British Literature, Business

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Ian says

Brilliance. A simple word to describe the immaculate amount of great research and effort put into the making of this book. Good job David Goldblatt, this is certainly a great accomplishment, for all competitors to reckon with.

Marc Daley says

If you're looking for a sociological approach, this might be the book for you, but there's really nothing earth-shattering even if you're a casual fan of the Premier League. Big chasm between the rich and poor teams, racism still in place due to the old guard, a nationalist approach to the game - all covered in sometimes overwhelming detail.

James says

This was an intriguing subject but its detached analysis of English football (as well as commentary on Wales, Ireland and Scotland despite the cross of St George on the cover) meant that it lacked a bit of the life and emotion that is really part of the game's appeal, and was a bit of a dry read.

I thought the structure itself was quite good, discussing the abstract of football and the match experience, before looking more specifically at regional differences and identity, and the FA. The problem was that it trod a fine line between putting the football in context and stating things already known by someone who attends or follows football. On the one hand, the historical context of the now too frequent minute's silence (there were barely any until the 1990s) was quite interesting, on the other hand I know what the warm up is like because I've seen some.

The best chapter for me was on race, as it was approached with a proper historian's eye, rather than the lazy journalist trope of Ron Atkinson bringing black players to West Brom (who weren't even the first team to field 3 black players). Not afraid to quote racist terms verbatim, he made good use of primary source material to present a more balanced account. This was the strength of the book overall too, as Goldblatt described the regions I know about accurately rather than as someone who once heard a joke about Coventry and 'knows' it's a 60's block of concrete.

Perhaps there was less material to work with, but the sections on gender and the FA felt very short, and he completely avoided the political nature of the banned women's football (namely that matches were fundraisers for war charities) and doesn't even address *why* the FA might not have taken kindly to this. Yet he does devote a page to David Beckham, so it's not as though Goldblatt wanted to avoid the detail.

I really expected to enjoy this, and the foundations were there - I gather Goldblatt is left-wing but despite comments on the distribution of wealth, he was more balanced on fan-ownership than *When Saturday Comes*, and he had actually done proper research. But I'm not sure who this would suit - a British football fan

would find it too geeky or would have followed enough of the modern game that too little of it would be revelatory, and a foreigner would probably be lost on the distinctions between Hull, Leicester and Bristol, however astutely discussed.

Martin Caballero says

Excellent Primer to English Football Culture

The perfect place to start for someone interested in English (and British) football culture. Goldblatt has an entertaining style even as he goes through some of the more mundane details. Highlights are the stadium-game day experience, but covers race, politics, gender, money, etc. Honestly assessed both the triumphs and the underlying malaise (and decay of public interests in face of super charged private business).

Rodney McCain says

This would have been a MUCH better book if Goldblatt had left the section on Northern Irish football out of it. Why? Simply because with this section he completely undoes the feeling you have previously in the book of it been well thought out and thoroughly well researched- the section on Northern Irish football is littered with factual inaccuracies, and 'coloured' throughout with Goldblatt's own personal views on the given situations being described, which has a distinctive pro-Irish Nationalist taint- he has every right to hold those views, but it is disappointing to see his own views take away from the factual accuracy of what he is discussing.

Otherwise this is an interesting read, though you get the impression that he has perhaps bitten off more than he can chew, as some subjects seem to get 'brushed on' without much depth- frankly, this book could have been twice the length it is due to the myriad of topics available under it's title!

Gemma says

If you're looking to read a book that ties the formation of the Premier League to the rise and fall of Thatcherism in Britain, this is the book for you. But be warned -- this is not a sports book. It's sociology through the lens of football, only a history in the sense that it references things that happened in the past in order to make a point. It's a cogent book, but I occasionally found Goldblatt's thinking hard to pin down -- as much as he seems to appreciate the slightly less racist/sexist world of football today, I get the sense that he'd trade all that progress for the pre-Premier League fan culture.

Stephen Goldenberg says

A must-read book for football fans even though it won't tell them much they don't know already about what's happened to football in the last 25 years. The sad fact is that however scandalous and incompetent football's ruling elites are, however venal, money grubbing and overpaid football managers and players are and however overhyped and overpriced premier league football is, once you get hooked from childhood and

devoted to following your team, it's impossible to give it all up in disgust.

The only saving grace (and it's not really any comfort) , as David Goldblatt so eloquently shows, is that what has happened to football has merely mirrored what's been happening in the rest of society.

Josh C. says

I wish I'd thought more of it.

Goldblatt is thorough and knowledgeable as always -- no fault to be found in his research. But at times I felt stuck in a well-written sociology thesis built on the standard academic/pop-political framework for modern Britain, the assumption that Margaret Thatcher's tenure destroyed everything that once was good and true about Britain, wrenching its destiny away from the social-democratic paradise that should have been. Goldblatt assumes the unassailable truth of this narrative, and slots the football* in neatly along that track.

Does it work? Sure -- the view of modern football as denatured is such a well-worn path, Goldblatt's task becomes simply matching parallel (if tired) narratives. But why couldn't he offer something different -- or at least an attempt at persuasion, with an implicit acknowledgment of differing views?

A more open mind might have let Goldblatt see broader benefits to the middle class-ization of football; his admission to decreasing acceptance of public xenophobia and ethnic intolerance almost feels backhanded within the sea of woe. (Denunciations of changing supporter demographics always strike me as loaded: are new supporters simultaneously damned for not watching what came before and damned for signing on now?) Entertaining the idea that football's positive market signals of the 1990s and 2000s, like Thatcher's governments' long tenure, could have been traceable to truly positive developments rather than cynical commercial/political manipulation would have made for a better book -- and an argument we don't see regularly from the WSC/Guardian smart set.

N.B. The American publisher's subtitle does a disservice to Goldblatt's work. The Premier League is a factor in his analysis, but not at all the center -- that emphasis mis-sells the book. Presumably someone decided the U.S. name recognition of the "EPL" brand would help sales vs. the accuracy of "English football" or a translation to "soccer", but it was a poor choice.

** I usually say "soccer", but this book is so closely bound to English culture, the American usage felt out of place even in a review.*

Andrewh says

Worthy but dull - almost the polar opposite of the premier league itself.

Lloyd says

Essentially a sociology of English football, I read this a few months ago and recall quite enjoying it but being slightly disappointed by the ending where the author moves the spotlight on to gender before summing the whole book up through a rather tokenistic four page conclusion. As important as gender is, I wondered

whether there were more pressing issues to discuss. Definitely worth a look if you're prepared to make time for a football read, though.

Brent Davis says

This is a long winded dissertation on English society surrounding football. It is as dry witted as the Sahara. The degree in which I slogged through the book was exhaustive. I will not recommend this book to even the most die hard of fans.

Nick Rath says

Considering myself a fairly avid soccer fan, this book was informative on aspects of the soccer world in England that I had no idea even existed. Goldblatt has done his thorough research to explain the evolution of the sport in one of the most infamous nations where it is played. Soccer really boils down to finances at the end of the day, and a lot of the economy in a surrounding area can affect how the team located there performs. It was a little boring at times to hear facts listed off when Goldblatt was supporting a claim to the sport's evolution, but at least he was basing his thoughts off of realistic empirical data, as well as valuable anecdotes. Certainly a book that I would recommend to any person interested in soccer, or sports economics.

Andrew Pratley says

This is not you average football book. It is much more ambitious. This book is about football's place in society & how it has been changed by it. It is part a history but it is in parts a polemic, a work of sociology & politics. It is written by someone who loves the game but is not frightened to see its flaws. I especially enjoyed the chapter cataloging the malfeasance of those of so many "businessmen" who have owned many of our clubs up & down the country. The eminent social historian David Kynaston, in his review in the Guardian, described this book as being exceptional & very nearly a great. That judgement is good enough for me.

Menno Pot says

This book is a brilliant analysis of modern English football, its structure - and how its current structure and identity can be explained. A very interesting read. I live David Goldblatt's football writing anyway: he is a football writer who understands society and culture - and links it with football. His 'Futebol Nation' (about Brazil) is even better than this book.

Vuk Trifkovic says

Disappointing. Goldblatt has a brilliant mind, can write very well and knows his onions. Yet, the book manages to be overambitious, stretched too thin and wilfully ignoring many pertinent factors of the

contemporary game - most notably booming football podcasting scene for instance. Worse of all, there is kind of lame conclusion to it all.
