

The Beautiful Game continued

spite of the latter statement the pitch in fact had a notorious slope, a drop of fully 18 feet from the north to south goal. (Perhaps this is what started the "Never believe what you read in the press" adage)

If one were to try and encapsulate some of the successes and failures associated with one of the games less glamorous clubs, then the undulating fortunes of Bradford City over the years would possibly be included in its pages. Along with Chelsea who emulated City's feat in 1905, Bradford City remained the only club to be elected to The Football League before they had played a single senior match. Indeed they literally walked into full membership of the Second Division before a team had been assembled or had established a ground on which to play.

But all of that, is times gone by, what about today?

"If you think football is all about superstadiums, astronomical transfer fees and players' wages resembling National Lottery jackpot winnings, your eye is very much off the ball."

So begins one page on Sunderland FC's website. Being a bit of a sceptic and not a footie anorak I decided to do a little research, what I found surprised me. The Professional Footballers' Association (PFA), the FA Premier League and the Football League is apparently most conscious of importance of the "community" - which is why football clubs across the UK have adopted schemes to foster the game's health in their areas. And it is not just the football that they have been concerned about. As well as football coaching, and junior league promotions, issues such as education, health awareness and aid for the unemployed have been addressed.

The broad idea of professional football clubs channelling their undoubted appeal back into positive initiatives in their areas was brought to life in 1986 - after the success of a pilot scheme set up by "The



Footballers' Further Education and Vocational Training Society" - a charity formed in 1979 by the PFA and The Football League.

The experimental "Community Programme in Professional Football," funded by the Government's Manpower Services Commission and involving six North West Clubs - Bolton Wanderers, Bury, Manchester City, Manchester United, Oldham Athletic and Preston

North End - was such a success expansion followed. The Football Trust offered substantial funding support in 1991, enabling the national Football in the Community scheme to provide the opportunity for the remaining professional football clubs to set up schemes. A new management framework was also established with the backing of The Football Association.

After more funding and revised objectives, as well as support from the then newly formed FA Premier League, schemes were fully operational at over 90 professional and semi-professional clubs when the national Football in the Community scheme celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1996.

Work in schools has been the most important feature. The Schools Programme is well established at primary and junior level and is closely linked with the National Physical Education Curriculum. It offers football coaching and games, together with visits to Matches and training grounds - and player appearances at schools.

Involvement with school children is not limited just to the sport. Once again I was impressed with the information about Sunderland FC's approach. Ten thousand 5-18 years used a free service during 1998 which used aspects of the workings of Sunderland AFC as a vehicle for learning. The same classroom facilities were also used as a "homework club" for children living close to the Stadium of Light who might experience difficulties working at home allowing them to study in more motivating environs. In addition to the free learning, an Attendance Reward Initiative used the attraction of Sunderland AFC to persuade children to improve their school punctuality and attendance. The incentive rewards were 1,000 match tickets for a major home match and 1,000 ground tours went to children from 200 secondary schools across the region.

As one who has had his eyes closed to football for thirty years or more, I can only say that I was pleasantly surprised at the information I found, perhaps I should take another look at "The beautiful game" AM



Sir Geoff Hurst with Denise Burton in Riyadh Jan. 2000