“Like Everton, you’re just a small club”—perceptions of greatness in British club football

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Abstract
The early regulatory protocols for organising a football club were established in Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century. Because of their long history, many English clubs founded within this period are considered to be among the most prestigious in the football world. However, longevity of existence versus current competitive status has led many to question how the stature of a club might be gauged. In February 2007 Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez referred to their city rivals Everton as a “small club”, sparking a heated debate which has stirred reactions from the media as well as players, managers and supporters. This paper explores fan perspectives regarding how the status of British clubs might be defined, particularly in the context of what counts as a “big” or a “great” club. Electronic fanzine (e-zine) data was gathered from the supporters of ten clubs from five British cities during two consecutive football seasons. Responses were grouped according to historical significance, domestic and international success, fan base, structural strength, global appeal and individuality. Supporters noted that European success built on a legacy of domestic achievement was the most significant gauge of club stature, with Champions League victories a prerequisite for “greatness”. Domestic trophy tallies were also considered important, although such achievements were discussed relative to the competitiveness of individual tournaments. Ground size, fan base and distinctiveness were also perceived to be key definers of a club’s prominence, as was “strategic assets” such as playing and managerial staff.

Introduction
The organisation of world football is administered through the international governing body FIFA (International Federation of Association Football). Prior to the establishment of FIFA, the English Football Association were responsible for devising and pioneering many of the regulations and formats of competitions. Consequently, the popularity of English football rose dramatically during the second half of the nineteenth century. Numerous British clubs were formed during this period, reflecting a variety of connections to churches, industries and localities (Lupson, 2006). Many of these institutions were run by business-minded entrepreneurs who capitalised on
the interest which the working classes had in watching their local football team compete. The development of clubs and competition structures provided opportunities for spectators to collectively reaffirm their commitments to beliefs and values which underpinned their cultural identity as football supporters. With allegiances to certain clubs established national rivalries would emerge and were sometimes demonstrated away from the field of play (Sack and Suster, 2000).

With the increasing popularity of football the FA Challenge Cup was founded in 1871 becoming the world’s first domestic knock-out competition. The national Football League was established in 1888. These annual tournaments placed the sport firmly in the context of competition (Rookwood and Buckley, 2007). Many of the historically significant clubs from this era exist today and remain fiercely competitive. However, other aspects of the game’s identity have evolved extensively in recent times. Player migration and the international consumption of football from a global network of supporters are symptoms of globalisation, spectacularisation and professionalisation (Szymanski and Kuypers, 1999). The English Premier League, together with Europe’s primary competition, the UEFA Champions League (Union of European Football Associations) are considered by some to be the world’s most prestigious club competitions (Solberg and Gratton, 2004; Kirby, 2007). Therefore, many British clubs have sought to protect, reclaim and re-invent their identities as serious contenders for success at competitions. However, given the complex make-up of British football clubs, it has recently been suggested that success is not the only barometer of “greatness” (Barrett, 2007). Football is often presented globally as a sport in which success at the top level is of principal importance (Conn, 1997; Parrish, 2002). It is claimed by some however that what many clubs and their supporters ascribe to most is not success necessarily, but “greatness” (Barrett, 2007).

A recent debate concerning how the stature of a club might be judged was highlighted following a series of statements from representatives of Liverpool FC and Everton FC during the 2006-07 season. The collective achievements of the two clubs render the city of Liverpool the most successful in English football, and among the most famous in the European game. However, in an interview following the Merseyside Derby between the two teams in February 2007, Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez referred to Everton as a “small club” on three separate occasions. Everton manager David Moyes replied by saying, “…I was disappointed that Rafa had called Everton a small club, Everton are not a small team, Everton are one of the biggest clubs in England” (Prentice, 2007: 48). Everton defender Alan Stubbs added, “…we don’t see ourselves as a small club, not at all. If they feel they [Liverpool FC] are that much bigger than us, they should have been getting better results” (King, 2007: 43). This public exchange of views provoked many reactions from players, managers, commentators and supporters from other clubs concerning “…what counts as a big or great
“club” (Prentice, 2007: 48). This argument has been reinforced on the terraces, where supporters have expressed their attitudes towards various events through ritualised chanting (Armstrong, 2000; Clark, 2006). Chants have defined and reflected shared and distinct social meanings since the emergence of the game as a national sport. Liverpool supporters were the first to react to this particular subject through chanting. For example, when facing opposition whom they consider to demonstrate “delusions of grandeur”, Liverpool fans often chanted, “…like Everton, you’re just a small club”. Supporters from other teams have since adopted a similar approach as a means of consciously differentiating their own ‘great’ club from other ‘small’ rival clubs.

Fan perspectives have often been underrepresented in football sociology, yet this demographic has been found to be a key indicator of the nature of their sub-cultural identities (Millward, 2006). Consequently, by focusing on a variety of British clubs and localities, this research sought to give voice to what supporters consider to be the defining characteristics of greatness. Practical details concerning data collection were developed after facilitating a focus group containing supporters selected from the “target population” (Khan, Anker, Patel, Barge, Sadhwani, and Kohle, 1991: 145). Supporters from ten clubs in five British cities were included in this research. The table below lists the clubs selected for the focus group discussions and the primary reasons for selecting them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Club</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Reason for Selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rangers</td>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>Won more trophies than any other club in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celtic</td>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>Culturally and historically significant; the only Scottish team to have won the European Cup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>Most domestically and internationally successful English league club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everton</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>Longest serving member of the top flight of English football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester United</td>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>A global brand with huge fan base; won more FA Cups than any other club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester City</td>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>Maintains a large supporter base despite not winning a trophy for thirty years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notts County</td>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>Oldest professional domestic club in the world although currently in the fourth division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nottingham Forest</td>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>Only team two have won the European Cup more than their domestic league title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chelsea</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>A currently successful club, which lacks historical pedigree and extensive fan base</td>
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<td>---------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arsenal</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Has won more trophies than any other London Club, and the third most successful English club</td>
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Goffman (1974) highlights the need to examine how people express their perceptions and experiences through particular activities, citing letters written to be published in newspapers as an example. He suggests that, “…such discursive frames are developed to enable people to discuss and define their experiences, turning, what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful” (Goffman, 1974: 21). Fan magazines (fanzines) also contain examples of this kind of expression (Haynes, 1995) which have developed into an increasing number of electronic “e-zines”. Millward (2006: 378) claims these are “…best considered as a developing part of fanzine culture” which allows a great deal of fan-conjecture to be shared globally as soon as it is uploaded.

The categories below were established from trends of discussion in e-zines, which also helped to identify a schedule for the focus group discussions. The categories were: historical significance, domestic and international success, fan base, structural strength, global appeal and individuality.

**Historical significance**

A number of respondents suggested that the longevity of a club’s importance was a key determinant of its level of greatness. Many commented on individual records held by certain clubs. Everton for example were discussed as being “…one of the twelve founder members of the football league”. Supporters also repeatedly mentioned the name of Notts County in this context, as the oldest club in the world. However, they felt that this factor alone was insufficient as a barometer of importance or success, but that such a characteristic was vital underling their overall sporting achievements, “…to be great you’ve got to have been there for generations”. Indeed, most participants who commented on this issue noted that it is impossible to be considered great without having a long tradition in the competitive structures of a domestic league, “…your history should go back to the nineteenth century. You can’t have clubs like Paris Saint Germain (PSG) thinking they’re a football club”. PSG was an interesting case that was mentioned on numerous occasions. Despite having only been formed in 1971, the French club were one of the founder members of G14, the elite club-based organisation established in 2000 and exclusive only to the most influential clubs in European football. Another supporter claimed that, “…being in G14 is about power and money, not greatness. Its all about the here and now, but football has a long
memory.” Furthermore, another participant contended that, “…yes, history is vital, but the most important thing is consistency. Not just being there in whatever league but winning things. Greatness is about achieving and winning trophies year after year, right through the eras of football.” Similarly, practitioners such as Allt (2004) claim that consistent achievement underpinned by historical significance serve as a defining characteristic of a great football club.

**Domestic success**

When discussing achievements in the National League, many respondents argued that there was a clear distinction between being a “big club” and a “great club”. For example, “…a big club can just be one that’s up there. Not really challenging for things but say, a top eight side. Like Aston Villa or Tottenham, greatness is about challenging for competitions and winning them”. A minority suggested that status can be relative to different Leagues. However, as the following fan argued, “…you get sides in the Conference or the Championship, and League One and Two in fact, who are considered big clubs because they’re always towards the top of their division but never really go up. Big clubs are really just those who have mostly been in the top division”. Nicholls (2002) makes this point also, in discussing Everton as a “big club” in English football. Fans agreed that there is a consistent barometer of greatness in this regard, which is reflected in the tallies clubs have built up for winning things. The Premier League title [known as the Football League title from 1888-1992] was considered, “…the most obvious mark of achievement”. Liverpool and Manchester United are the most successful in this regard, having won 18 and 17 titles respectively. Arsenal and Everton have the next best records, with 13 and 9 championships. This line of reasoning currently prevents Chelsea from being considered a great club, as they had won only one title before securing back to back championships in 2005 and 2006, “…Chelsea are a big team now, but they’re far from great. Three titles is a joke. Even Sheffield Wednesday have won more”. Football writers such as Balague (2005) and Maguire (2007) make similar claims in differentiating clubs in relation to trophy tallies. It was also considered important to have won the league title “…across the eras. You can’t just win loads in a short space of time and then disappear for a couple of decades. Man United didn’t win a title between ‘69 and ‘92”. However, most respondents suggested that the tally of titles was the most notable feature denoting greatness, success “…across the eras” was deemed secondary.

The professional game in both England and Scotland is experiencing changing attitudes towards domestic cup competitions, which were once considered more prestigious than they are in the current climate. The (English) FA Cup for example, is “…the oldest and most famous competition in the world. But it’s less important than it was”. Another supporter claimed, “…the league title has always been number one.
But the FA Cup used to come a close second, with the league cup a distant third. Now, with the money involved in Europe, the FA Cup is not as big as it was”. Because of the relatively inferior financial rewards for success in the FA Cup relative to qualification for and success in European competition, many felt that the FA Cup has become devalued. Some claimed the most notable development in this regard occurred in the 1999-2000 season, when cup holders Manchester United decided not to enter a team due to fixture congestion, “…when the Mancs never went in that year the FA Cup took a knock I don’t think it will ever recover from.” In Scottish football, the domestic cup competitions have also experienced similar trends. According to one participant, this was not as pronounced as in England, “…in Scotland, it’s different. The top teams want to win the Scottish Cup. Outside the Old Firm [Rangers and Celtic] clubs know it’s their only chance of success, but when the Old Firm get knocked out of Europe, we try to win the Cups as well”. Therefore, in the Scottish but particularly the English league, the domestic mark of greatness still seems to be the Championship rather than the FA and League Cups.

**International success**

When discussing the notion of greatness, many supporters expressed statements such as, “…Rangers should be up there as they’ve won more trophies than any other club in the world”. However, others claimed that this factor should not be considered the only indicator of greatness. Respondents suggested that there were two key reasons for this. Firstly, success in individual countries should be considered relative to the strength of competition in each league, this point is also made by Barrett (2007). One fan argued that: “…[In Scotland] everyone knows that it’s either Rangers or Celtic for the league, and usually one of those will win the cups as well. In other countries it’s harder to win things. A title in Italy or England is worth five in Scotland”. Indeed only five Scottish teams have ever won the league title in Scotland, with Rangers having won the award 52 times. By comparison, 23 different English teams have won the English Championship. The second reason that domestic trophies alone were not thought to be the only gauge of greatness was the relevance of European competitions. For many supporters, the UEFA Cup, and in particular the UEFA Champions League provides a reliable measure of greatness, “…the Champions League separates the men from the boys. You look at the top clubs. Real Madrid, Liverpool, Bayern Munich, Ajax. They have won their own title more than anyone else, but they also hold the records for winning the most European Cups. That is what greatness is”. Solberg and Gratton (2004) also identify success in such tournaments as true tests of greatness. However, again it was suggested by participants that in isolation, a club’s record in the Champions League should not be considered the only measurement of greatness. “…[Nottingham] Forest have won two European Cups, but only one league title. Are we to take it then that they are as great as Juventus … or Barcelona, who’ve
also won two European Cups but are dominant in their own leagues?"

In addition, a minority of fans claimed that “…the bigger the competition the more prestigious it is”. However, if this were true, then fans would rate the World Club Championship above the UEFA Champions League. The former competition is staged each December in Japan and comprises of the winners of each continental division. The majority of those who commented on the event made statements such as, “…it’s a bit like playing in the Charity [Community] Shield after winning the League or FA Cup, or the Super Cup after winning the UEFA Cup or Champions League. No one really cares about it”. In the context of European club football, the Champions League was considered the most prestigious competition, and the “…true mark of greatness”. The UEFA Cup was thought to be of secondary importance, although “…it still holds a bit of sway, especially if you beat some top teams to win it”. One respondent summed up fan opinion in this respect by claiming, “…you’ve got to be in Europe to be a big club, and win in Europe to be a great one”. Clearly therefore, consistent European exposure is important, and is the mark of a big club. Only by repeat success in the competition can a team be considered truly great. Using a notional system of ranking one supporter explained, “…Madrid on 9, AC Milan on 7, Liverpool on 5. They stand out above the rest. Then Ajax and Bayern Munich on 4 each. With Man U on 3, you’ve then got a tier of Juventus, Barcelona, Inter, Benfica and Porto on 2. No club outside of these can be considered great. Big maybe, but not great”.

**Fan base**

Another classification discussed in the context of club stature was the supporter base. Some respondents suggested that clubs which have an average home attendance of less than “…40,000 supporters should not be considered big. And you cannot be great if you’re not big”. The majority of participants made statements suggesting that few clubs who attracted average crowds which exceed this benchmark were not considered big clubs, “…most big clubs get big gates. There is the odd exception. Man City haven’t won a trophy for 30 years. Newcastle haven’t won one for 40, and they both pull in crowds over 50,000”. Another claimed that fan base alone is not enough to warrant “big club” status, “…you’ve got to have the mix. You have to have won things. A big ground and a big crowd is one thing, but no success means you’re not a big club. And if you’ve never won the European Cup you’re not a great club, simple as that”. Other supporters suggested however that home attendance records are, “…only half the story. What about away games? Some clubs are held back by the size of the ground. Arsenal were but now they’ve caught up with their new ground. Liverpool are still held back. But look at the away support as well”. In addition, another supporter argued, “…any club worth their salt will take their allocation for a typical game. It’s usually 3,000 at the top level. But you see the size of a club change when you get to a
semi or a final and you get more tickets”. A similar point was raised by another participant, who said, “…Liverpool took 40,000 to Dortmund [for the UEFA Cup final] in 2001 and the same number to Istanbul [for the Champions League final] in 2005. It’s no coincidence we won both finals”. In examining patterns of away support in European competition, Hooton (2007: 132) makes a similar point, referring to clubs who take “…three times their official allocation of supporters to big games”. Finally, another respondent claimed that, “…you get successful teams who don’t have the fan base. To be great you need to win things in your own country and in Europe, and have a huge body of fans home and away. Without one of those you’re not great”. The concept of Fan base was therefore considered to be an important category although secondary to International success.

Global appeal

Some supporters suggested that in addition to having a large fan base who attend matches, it was also important to have a network of global supporters, “…having fans in the Americas, Africa or the Far East is testament to being a great club. It’s like the reward of greatness. Because foreign markets are worth so much to British and European clubs and there’s only a small number of teams capable of capitalising on that market”. Most other respondents made negative comments about the globalisation of the game, some calling this “…foreign fan invasion” and the “…price to pay for success”. However, nearly all respondents agreed with the former assertion in that global interest was a sign of a club’s stature, “…Chelsea haven’t hit that market because they haven’t won enough. Maybe in 30 years if they win a few Champions Leagues and Celtic and Rangers are in a poor league so don’t have the exposure. It’s really only the top three or four from England, Spain and Italy who are really popular abroad”. Solberg and Gratton (2004) also argue that international appeal and support is a key indicator of a club’s stature. Fans explained that the “desperate attempts” to get promotion to and avoid relegation from the top tier of English football have seen the league become more competitive. In the opinion of some participants, the desire to play in the English Premiership is for many clubs viewed as, “…a chance to get recognition worldwide. People all over the world know Blackburn, Wigan and Bolton because they’re in the top flight, but they’re just three small Lancashire towns”. However, again this recognition is, “…not enough to be a big club. To be big you’ve got to be looking to win things. To be great you’ve got to actually win trophies”. Global exposure was therefore not considered to be a necessary determinant of club stature, and was thought to be less consequential than having pedigree (long history) competition success and a loyal (and local) fan base.
Structural strength

Some fans commented on the importance of structural strength as an indicator of success and greatness. Although respondents did not use such terminology, several made comments on what Szymanski and Kupers (1999: 45) term as “strategic assets and architecture”. According to these authors, strategic assets include the resources available exclusively to one club, including players and managers, enabling a competitive advantage to be established. One supporter argued that, “…some clubs live off the fact that they’ve had big players. Like Napoli and Seville with Maradona, or when Middlesbrough signed the two Brazilians. It does put the club on the map, and it may help the club progress, but without having a legacy of success, it just papers over cracks”. Another fan argued, “…for big clubs having top players is essential. It’s a sign of ongoing strength. Having players who help you push for the next trophy is part of what greatness is. A great club without top players can become a club in decline”. This is an interesting point that was discussed by several respondents claiming that players and managers are vital components in the context of greatness, but that even when a club has previously enjoyed such lofty status, subsequent periods of failure can reduce the perceived stature of an institution. “…If you look at Benfica, they were huge once, dominating Europe. Now they’re just average. Their history earns them respect, but they haven’t had a top player for years, and they hardly ever win a trophy in Portugal”. Therefore, most respondents considered strategic assets to be important, as “…without top managers and top players, you win nothing”. However, as with the previously discussed categories, this was considered important to include because it demonstrated consistency in this context.

Individuality

The final element discussed in the context of greatness was individuality. Many respondents argued that it was important for clubs to have developed unique identities, which help differentiate them from their competitors. Fans made reference to socio-political factors in this regard. For example, “…if you look at Celtic, they’re known as an Irish club. They represent Irish nationalism for many. So a lot of Irish people all over the world follow them. It’s like Barcelona being the Catalan team”. When discussing the distinctiveness of individual British clubs, some argued that, “…because there’s so many teams it’s hard to stick out. But one or two do. Man United and Liverpool are the obvious ones”. Indeed, these two clubs were considered by the majority of participants to be the most idiosyncratic of all English clubs, “…people love them and are drawn to them because of their success, but it’s more than that. It’s what they’ve been through”. Some claimed that the two most significant tragedies the clubs had experienced helped explain why they felt a greater connection with them. Respondents were indicating their respect for the club’s fortitude during periods of
distress as this may add to a sense of greatness about them. The Munich air disaster in 1958, in which 23 people died, eight of whom were Manchester United players has in the opinion of some supporters, “…set United apart and given them an identity as being more than a club. Disasters do that”. Far more significant in terms of the loss of human life was the Hillsborough disaster, where 96 Liverpool fans were crushed to death at the 1989 FA Cup semi-final. The Taylor Report that followed this tragedy made 76 recommendations, some of which changed the face of English football (Conn, 1997; Ballard, and Suff, 1999).

In human terms, the Hillsborough tragedy helped unite many Liverpool fans. As one participant suggested, “…Hillsborough and Munich in a strange way have seen Man U and Liverpool become more famous, and their identities have developed as a result. Juventus with Heysel and Rangers with Ibrox Park, they have also had their disasters. There is something special about clubs who have been touched by sadness and have rose again to be victorious”. Chisari (2004) makes a similar point in discussing Italian responses to the 1985 Heysel disaster, in which 39 supporters were killed, as does Walker (2004) in his examination of the 1971 Ibrox Park disaster, where 66 fans died. In addition, Dietsch (2004) refers to the Torino airplane crash of 1949. 18 players died in the disaster from the “great Torino” team which dominated Italian football in the 1940s. The club have since experienced minimal success, with city rivals Juventus, having become the most famous and successful team in Italian domestic football. However, as well as noting that this Torino team “inspired the formation of fan groups”, Dietsch (2004: 309) states that, “…the 1980s literature and commemorative material published for old and new fans has ensured that the ‘great Torino’ remain at the forefront of the club’s history and that the Superga disaster continues to be embedded in what it means to be a Torino fan”. Although it is not implied that such identifications with disasters are exploited by clubs, it is claimed that certain tragedies are used, consciously or otherwise, to shape the identity of these footballing institutions. However, respondents in this research were divided on this issue, some arguing that such experiences have nothing to do with the stature of a club. One respondent stated that, “…teams like Arsenal and Everton have never had a tragedy and they are still right up there when it comes to winning trophies”. However, the majority of respondents contended that such disasters, etched into the fabric of the respective clubs, have seen supporters identify with their teams to a greater extent. Subsequently, fan subcultures have been developed, aspects of which numerous other clubs have attempted to recreate, and many supporters both locally and globally have come to respect the unique ethos of these footballing identities.
Conclusion

This article has examined the perspectives of football fans about their ideas for understanding stature and greatness of football clubs. Their opinions are seemingly integral to a discussion of the criteria by which the stature of a club could be gauged. A great deal of research on the sociology of fan-culture has already been carried out (e.g. Marsh, Fox, Carnibella, McCann and Marsh, 1996; Nicholls, 2002; Parrish, 2002). However, further investigation may be required to explore fan attitudes towards the meaning, status and value of football clubs in the context of the growing “Europeanisation” of individual domestic leagues. Subsequent work could explore the perspectives of supporters from European leagues as to how their fans comprehend notions of greatness and stature within their culture. This might build upon the interesting research already conducted by Millward (2006) relating to the social culture of European football competition. This kind of further research could be revealing for the football community in what it tells us about our regional, national and continental identities within this sport.

References


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3. Dear reader, if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: deaves@tees.ac.uk and Joel Rookwood: rookwoj@hope.ac.uk