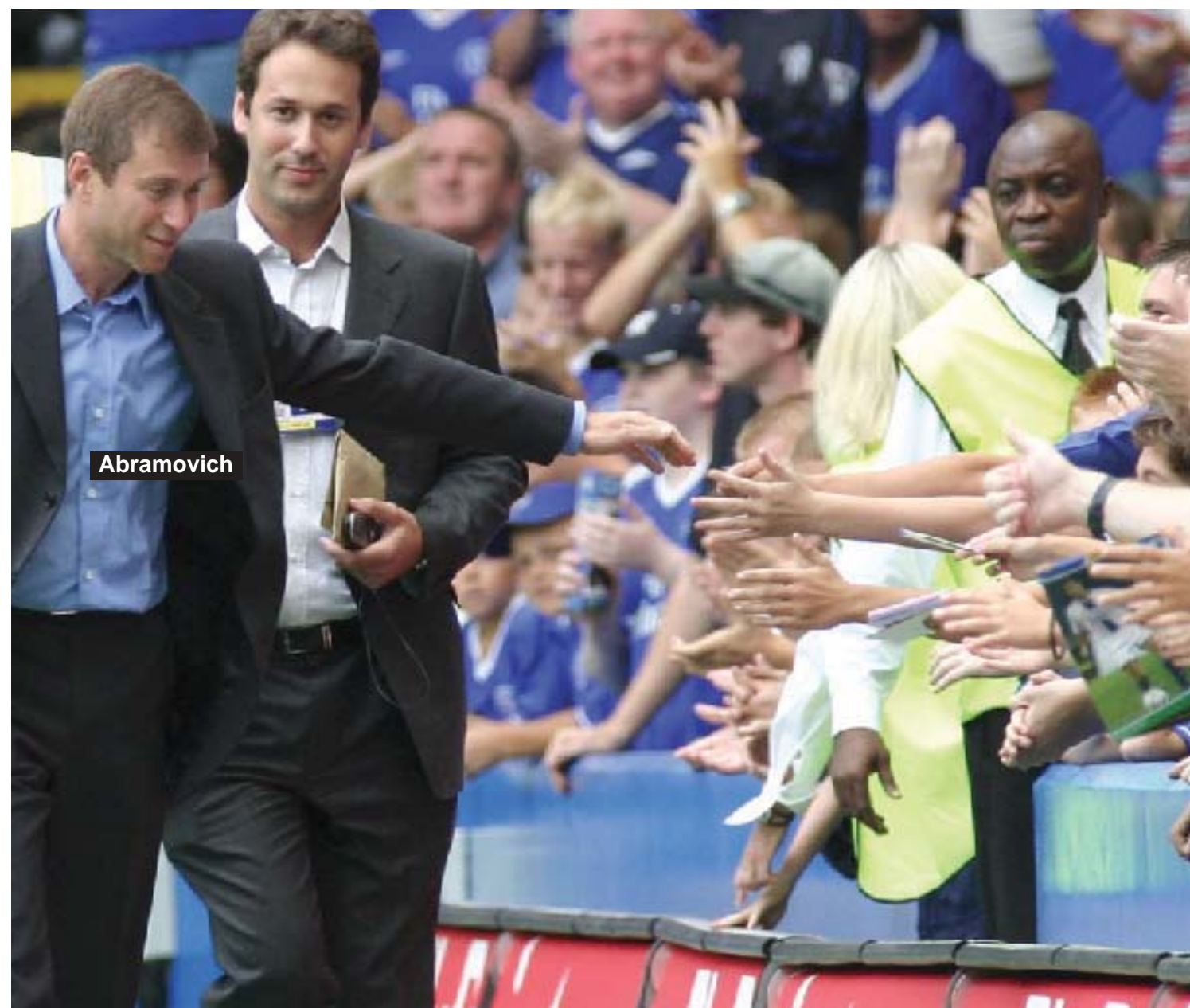


# Global game has delusions of grandeur

By Norman Hubbard



Abramovich

The hysterical hordes make the airport barriers creak, such is their desperation to see Damien Johnson and Liam Ridgewell. The Shanghai branch of the Andy O'Brien fan club is out in force to grant their hero a rapturous welcome. Tokyo has never seen anything like it as the city comes to a standstill for the day that Danny Higginbotham lands in Japan.

And there is only one picture adorning the back page of all the American newspapers: Dean Leacock and Darren Moore posing in front of the Hollywood sign as Derby County prepare to face Wigan Athletic in an eagerly-anticipated sell-out in Los Angeles.

If those scenarios sound feasible to you, you're probably the owner of a football club. And, in particular, a club in the wrong half of the Premier League. Amid the depressing inevitability of the plans to stage matches all around the world, the self-delusion of some of those responsible for making such decisions is perhaps the most remarkable element.

Proprietors such as the Glazer family at Manchester United, Liverpool's Tom Hicks and George Gillett and Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich can back these

proposals, safe in the knowledge that their clubs have lucrative global fanbases. Financially, such a development could only aid them, as they well know.

Yet while they scheme to inflate their profits, perhaps envy has overcome their counterparts at lower-profile clubs. Maybe greed has obscured their critical faculties. The Premier League may be a highly effective collective bargaining tool, but that does not mean that support is democratically divided among its members, and especially not in football's most profitable marketplace.

While Scandinavian supporters of British clubs have often attracted admiration for their wholehearted devotion to some particularly unsuccessful teams, their embracing of the inept and the under-achieving is not mirrored in other countries.

Indeed any examination of where the marketing men's odious acronym, the EPL, is most popular shows that, financially, one continent dominates: Asia. And any analysis of the Asian fanbase shows that the overwhelming majority of them support one of four clubs: Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester United.

While Manchester City have acquired Thai support since

Thaksin Shinawatra's takeover and Korean, Chinese or Japanese players will always have their personal backing, there is evidence to suggest that, fanatical though their support is, the Asian market is disproportionately focused on glamour, fame and success. Winning is a pre-requisite for their devoted support.

Or as the defiantly realistic Steve Coppell pointed out in November: 'There are 1.2 billion people in India who couldn't give a s\*\*t what happens to Reading.' And, in truth, not just Reading. Everton are fourth in the Premier League, but barely command a mention in much of the football-supporting world. Aston Villa, to British and European supporters, would be regarded as a genuinely big club as well, under Martin O'Neill, a progressive and entertaining team. In some places, however, they barely rate a footnote.

So while, if the 39th stage is introduced to the season in 2010-11, each club would benefit by around £5 million, the notion that it is a form of football evangelism that would create pockets of supporters for each club across the planet is laughable. If David Gold, one of the advocates of the proposals, imagines that Birmingham would

gain a group of fans in Guangzhou, he is mistaken. Even with Carson Yeung owning 29.9% of the club, he could not raise the funds in the Far East for a takeover. And if the somewhat mysterious men behind GSE can foresee a mushrooming of Derby's support in Myanmar, they are probably fantasising.

And instead of playing in front of their own supporters, such decision-makers risk turning their club into warm-up acts. If, as suggested, there are two games at each of five worldwide venues, the likelihood is that only one in each city will provoke genuine enthusiasm. Pity the poor teams involved in what is effectively the undercard. In England, Sunderland's home gate can exceed Chelsea's.

Were both on the bill in, say, Hong Kong a deserted ground could greet Roy Keane's men were they to face, for instance, Fulham before the fans timed their arrival to watch the major event. Reverse the order of the games and there could be a mass exodus after half an hour of Wigan versus Reading because the Liverpool match had already been concluded.

Is that, to quote the Reading chairman John Madejski 'common sense'? It might be, as Gold said, 'making history',



Gillett

Hicks

but if a match starts with an attendance five times greater than at the conclusion, not in the right way. And a reality check may be required for owners of the Premier League's lesser lights. They all generate support - in some cases, of admirable quantity and loyalty - in their own localities, and for a reason.

And envious as they may be when Manchester United embark on lucrative pre-season and even mid-season jaunts, everyone who witnessed the horror that was Bolton 0 Middlesbrough 0 should heed the words of the LA Galaxy general manager Alexi Lalas: 'We do not have a monopoly on crap soccer - it's played all over the world.' And merely moving a match several thousand miles will not make it an attractive proposition to a global market.



Thaksin

## Premier League football abroad is no loss

By Martin Johnson

The Premier League's plan to take some of their matches abroad has been greeted with a certain amount of scepticism, but some of us feel it is not nearly ambitious enough.

Why stop at Beijing and Tokyo when a small slice of Rio Ferdinand's weekly pay packet would fund the necessary research into space travel to take it to even more remote venues, leaving scientists on Pluto and Mars to conclude - having witnessed hordes of inebriated yobs being decanted from their modules - that there is no evidence of intelligent life on Earth.

The major cause of dissent appears to be that it alienates the fans, though any fan who believes that football - or any sport, come to that - is still run for their benefit really can't be trusted to go out on a Saturday afternoon on their own. Or a Friday night, or a Sunday lunchtime, or whenever

the TV companies' money dictates that a game will take place. Four o'clock on a Thursday morning if Channel 99 in Kuala Lumpur stumps up enough money for the broadcasting rights.

Football has long since sold off its soul to the highest bidder, and not all of us take unbridled delight in the passing of an era in which honest, toiling centre-forwards completing a hat-trick of headers end the game with a lace imprint on their foreheads, and get presented with a match ball coked in enough mud for a hippopotamus's bath, mixed with a dollop of Brylcreem. Nowadays, the Blackburn centre-half could afford to turn up for training in a chauffeured Bentley, and his name is unlikely to be Entwhistle or Higginbotham either.

Who on earth can honestly feel that they are supporting their home club when the teamsheet is sprinkled with names like

Kaka and Emerson, or some other wandering mercenary who has neither two names nor enough knowledge of the city he's playing in to be capable of giving a visitor directions to the town hall?

It wasn't always thus, and frankly you wonder quite how anyone gets worked up about the fortunes of a team who might once have had some passing resemblance to their home town or city, but are now nothing more than a speculative plaything for some foreigner who's made a fortune in oil, or the property market.

The fans might feel flattered when the players trot over to them after the final whistle and clap their hands, but you suspect that this is done more on auto-pilot than any deep-rooted affection. The players' applause would be more appropriately directed towards the Sky commentary box, because that's where their obscene wages

are coming from.

Given that there have been instances of entire teams made up of non-British players, never mind local boys, what does it matter whether Premier League sides play in this country or somewhere else? It's more about the advertisement on the shirts rather than the club crest, which is why we began with Woolwich Arsenal and may yet end up with Woolworths Arsenal.

Football may not always have been



as sexy as it is now, but at least you knew who you were shouting for, or at, and it was certainly more honest. There were no Oscar-winning performers in those days, and it's hard not to be cynical. The present lot have a penchant for kissing their shirt badges after scoring a goal, which may demonstrate their passion for the club, or it may merely reinforce the belief that they're all

jolly good actors.

The manager of my own home-town club when football first grabbed a hold, at roughly the same age - five or six - as it does now, was not some overseas import who could not speak English, but the owner of the pub 50 yards across the road. Billy Lucas was a hard man who brooked no arguments, largely through his training at chucking-out time.

Newport County were never any good, but you supported them because they were yours, blokes you would pass in the street, or sit next to in the adjoining barber's chair on a Saturday morning. Nowadays, I'll wager, nine-tenths of the football supporters in Newport will have eaten their first rusk wearing a Manchester United bib.

Back in another era, though, you were bonded to your home team for life. The only thing fans brought with them that remotely

resembled a weapon were those wooden rattles, which looked more like a bicycle pedal on the end of a stick. Rarely, for the poor sods on the Newport terraces, were they cranked up in celebration, as both hands were normally required to clutch your head in despair, and the rattles invariably found a final resting place over a garden hedge on your dejected trudge back home.

We still had our idols, albeit slightly different to today's. The goalie was a painter and decorator, and the wing-half, as they were called in those days, was a ferocious competitor by the name of Polly Rowland who, unusually by today's standards, was equally adept with either foot. He kicked the ball with his right foot, and his opponents with his left. Michael Parkinson still talks with reverence about Barnsley's Skinner Normanton but Polly made Skinner look about as tough as Cristiano Ronaldo. Sorry,

Parky.

These were the days before rampant commercialism took a hand, when Fred Trueman used to run in to bowl over virgin green turf rather than a multi-coloured logo inviting you to shop at Tesco, and when the urge to make as much money as possible wasn't so grotesque as to give us 950 world boxing champions.

In today's environment, the Premier League are not doing anything out of the ordinary in their urge to cash in still further on their product. But eventually they will go so far that no one will care a fig whether they end up playing in London, Los Angeles or Lapland.

In fact, the proposal requires a re-think only in that it caters for 380 matches in Britain, and 10 somewhere else. Far better, some might say, if they made it the other way round.