

Premier League clubs are just 'trophy assets' to big businessmen



Magnusson

The last rites were administered by an investment banker over a business breakfast in Zurich.

The subsequent inquest into the death of English football, as we know it, will record a verdict of assisted suicide.

The professional mourners will be out in droves, and no one will think to point the finger at people like Keith Harris.

Well, they should. As chairman of the investment bank Seymour Pierce, he's more influential than the political pygmies at the FA and Premier League.

He's on a nice little earner as football's dealmaker of choice, and has turned the game into a caricature of capitalism, a playground for corporate cowboys. Harris flogs football clubs as self-funding "trophy assets", convincing businessmen that they will make an annual return of up to 10 per cent on their investment over a period of seven to 10 years.

He began by brokering the deal that resulted in Ken Bates, that champion of the oppressed, being rescued by Roman Abramovich.

He's overseen takeovers at Aston Villa, Cardiff, Chelsea, Derby, Hull, Manchester City and West Ham.

He advises Celtic and Tottenham, and is peddling the dubious delights of owning Everton, Newcastle United and Nor-

wich City, among others.

At that corporate breakfast in Switzerland, Harris gave an unintentional glimpse into a sterile, self-serving world that has no place for you or me.

His message was bleak. Tradition can be packaged and sold but, in a recession, places like Merseyside are no-go areas. Working class heroes are worthless when they can't pay their way.

He might be able to find a buyer for the barrow boys who want Newcastle off their hands, but clubs like Everton, in atmospheric old-fashioned grounds at the hub of deep-rooted communities, can whistle.

"The demographics of Liverpool as a city are not hugely compelling,"

Harris told an audience of empty suits. "It is not a very wealthy city."

In a single comment, he had demeaned legends, insulted generations, alienated an entire city. He had trampled on the graves of Bill Shankly, Bob Paisley and Alan Ball, icons of institutions which are more than mere football clubs.

His status, as a self-proclaimed Manchester United fan, hardly helped.

Within 48 hours Harris had backtracked, but the damage was done. He'd named and shamed himself.

He'd prefer us to concentrate

on his successes, most notably in introducing Randy Lerner to Villa, but let's define him by his failures. He was chairman of the Football League at the time of the ITV Digital fiasco, which plunged 13 clubs into administration.

He advised Rupert Murdoch on his unsuccessful bid for Manchester United. He installed Icelanders, who can no longer rustle up the loose change for cod and chips, in the boardroom at West Ham.

He also sold Manchester City to Thaksin Shinawatra. He thinks it is "rather sad" the stateless renegade has had his UK visa revoked.

In this warped world, the little man does not matter.

Yours could be the next club to have its soul sold to an absentee landlord.

Fans are faceless consumers, income streams on a balance sheet.

They can be relied upon to put loyalty above logic, forget money worries and pay over the odds for their fix.

Tragically, he's right. People in positions of power, like those ignoble Lords Triesman and Mawhinney, are too preoccupied with their vendettas and their vanity projects to care.

Remember that, please, when they strike a pose and try to convince you they have only the interests of a great game at heart.

City striving to be bigger than Real Madrid, says Brazil star Robinho



Robinho

Robinho insists Manchester City can become one of the best clubs in the world and has set his sights on winning silverware in his first season at Eastlands.

The £32.5million Brazilian star has settled well to life in the Barclays Premier League, scoring seven goals since his arrival on transfer deadline day, and has lofty ambitions for both himself and his new team.

Mark Hughes' troops have nevertheless been a disappointment so far this season, winning just four times in 13 games to sit 12th in the English top flight, well below the aspirations of the club's new owners, the Abu Dhabi United Group.

But the 24-year-old Robinho, who captained the side against Hull, is remaining upbeat about his new life in Manchester.

He said: 'I have great ambitions for the team and myself. I want to be the best player in the world and for City to be one of the best teams.'

'The rest of the players and myself admire the ambitions of the owners of this club. 'We all want to strive to make it one of the best in the world. I like the way the game is played here. You still get great goals and great movement.'

'It is a physical game here in England but I can cope with it.'

'I am adapting well to life here. I get on well with my teammates, they are good players, and I am learning the language.'

'I am in a very good phase and hope this will continue. The best form of my career? Maybe.'

School of hard knocks: Robinho says he has no problems with the physical side of the English game

While City's league form might leave something to be desired, their exploits in Europe have been more encouraging, and reaching the group stages of the UEFA Cup raised hopes of a successful season at Eastlands.

A win against Steve McClaren's FC Twente in their opening Group A game has further boosted confidence in the camp, and Robinho believes there is quality enough within the camp to go all the way to the final - and to one day become as big as his former employers Real Madrid.

'We can win the UEFA Cup, it is one of our targets for this season,' he said. 'We know we are a side that is developing and growing but we also know we are capable of great things when we play well.'

'I want to stay here for many years and make history at City and become one of the great heroes. Doing well in the UEFA Cup would be a great start.'

'I came to Manchester City because I see them growing and getting bigger. Can they be as big as Real Madrid? Yes, I hope so.'