

I
LOVE
ARSENE WENGER

by

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I LOVE ARSENE WENGER - The Social Significance of a Football Innovator

Those of you who have read my autobiography *Subversive - or One Third of the Autobiography of a Communist* will know that I became an Arsenal fan in the 1930s through wearing a donated red football jersey in a game with coats as goalposts on Clapham Common and an unknown passer-by said 'up Arsenal'. Incidentally I have recently learned that the first red jerseys that Arsenal ever wore were also donated - by Nottingham Forest. You will also know that one day collecting autographs outside Highbury a clubfooted groundsman came out and asked me if I would like to work at Arsenal and I replied with the equivalent of Who Wouldn't! I was then led through Arsenal's marble halls, to the tunnel on to the pitch, given two bits of wood and I was told that my job would be to bang together these two sticks as I ran across the newly seeded pitch and keep the birds off! This duty I performed until the start of the season when I asked if I could have a job on match days. This I was granted at one old shilling per day (5p) where my job was to dust all the seats, sit in the trainer's box before matches began and take VIPs across the pitch to the new west stand where there was a new restaurant and sit next to the trainer during the match. The trainer, of course, was the world famous Tom Whittaker. Here was football paradise for a young lad and it got better!

On alternate Saturdays when there were reserve games my duties were, with another lad on the ground staff to patrol this new stand which was then not open to the public for second team games and return the ball to play when it was accidentally kicked there. That my partner in this job was no less a person that Denis Compton soon to become just about the greatest cricketer of his age as well as an international footballer. These duties I performed until September 1939 when the second World War broke out and I was conscripted.

What has this to do with Arsene Wenger, I hear you say. Well the short answer is that there is a general clamour among the football community to have the present off-side law changed to what it was in 1925 which was influenced by Herbert Chapman who built the first great Arsenal team. But there are other reasons if you will let me proceed. There was some hilarity when I came to Wolverhampton in 1954 and people learned that I was an Arsenal supporter, and not without reason. Arsenal were in the doldrums, but Wolves were the greatest side in the land. Stan Cullis had built the only team able to defeat the might of Hungary which had given England the greatest jolt of post-war times. The glory of Wolves was demonstrated on December 13 1954 when they defeated a Honved side 3-2 containing Puskas, the best footballer in the world at that time. Most of those players who also toured Russia and Hungary are still with us and their names should be recorded as an Express and Star special supplement on the fiftieth anniversary of the Honved game has done: Williams, Stuart, Shorthouse, Slater, Wright, Flowers, Hancocks, Broadbent, Swinbourne, Wilshaw, Smith.

I became a Wolves fan when I came to Wolverhampton in 1954 (although my first love was still Arsenal) and reported a number of games for the *Daily Worker* having to leave before the end of the match to find a telephone box to make my report. A tricky business! But no disaster of last minute goals occurred.

A friend and fellow socialist travelled to eastern Europe with Wolves as an interpreter. This was Percy Young, a musicologist of vast erudition who taught at Wolverhampton Polytechnic. He was at one time the chair of Wolverhampton Race Equality Council. He found time to write *A History of British Football* which deals equally with the glory years of Wolves as it does with those of Arsenal, and it is with that book in my hand that I shall deal with any future incursion I make into the history of football.

And so I nearly come to Arsene Wenger, the greatest influence on the modern football revolution. But let me deal first with the Herbert Chapman revolution of the 1930s. Chapman was the manager of the most important team of the time, Huddersfield Town a team which won three consecutive first league championships and made numerous appearances in the semi-finals and finals of the FA cup, although they

never won it. Chapman left them before their third Championship in 1930 to join a nondescript, no-hoper of a London club called Arsenal. By 1939 Arsenal would be the most important club side in the world, having matched Huddersfield's three consecutive League Championships but also become twice winners of the FA Cup. Chapman did not live to see the full potential of the team he had built. He died suddenly on Saturday 6th January 1934.

Chapman's achievements were multi-faceted. Not only did he build the greatest team of the era, he knocked off 'The' from The Arsenal to ensure that in any alphabetic list Arsenal came first. He had a clock built on the south bank showing two forty five minute halves, when this was banned by the FA he changed the clock into an ordinary one. He was the first man to number players, and when this was banned he let his second team wear the shirts. He transformed the ground into the marble halls by building first the east stand and then the west stand. He also nearly became both the club manager and England's, an innovation which have might have survived if there had been any natural successor to Chapman. He was the first man to build a team round the new offside law of 1925 requiring two defenders behind the ball instead of three. But this deserves a more detailed discussion, since it is the reason for modern calls to return to the pre-1925 offside law.

Chapman's team contained in its forward line Joe Hulme the fastest winger in England and on the other flank Cliff (Boy) Bastin the ice cool and vastly talented teenager who entered professional football at age 16 with Exeter City, unprecedented in those days. Inside Hulme was David Jack, the most expensive player in Britain, one of the first buys of Chapman. The centre forward position was not occupied by stars of such distinction until Ted Drake who scored 7 goals in a game against Aston Villa, but who was so beset by injuries that his career was cut short. The jewel in the crown, however was Alex James, perhaps the greatest schemer ever and fully entitled to stand with Thierry Henry as one of the greatest forwards of all times.

To discuss the rest of the team we must refer back to the change in the off-side rule in 1925. In October 1925 Arsenal were thrashed 7-0 by Newcastle and Charlie Buchan insisted to Chapman that changes he had advocated from the beginning of the season be implemented and Chapman agreed. The full backs were moved out to mark the wingers (previously they had marked the half backs) and a 3-4-3 formation adopted. Neither Buchan or Chapman was responsible for these changes but Chapman must be credited with the ultimate success of the system when he found a stopper centre half in Herbert Roberts and the dream team was complete. A goal keeper, Preedy or Lewis, until Frank Moss became a fixture- two backs Tom Parker, later replaced by George Male (I always thought it should have been Leslie Compton), and Eddie Hapgood who became the England skipper as well as Arsenal's captain; two wing halves completed the team, they were both Welsh internationals, Charlie Jones and Bob John, the latter considered by responsible critics the lynch pin around which Arsenal revolved. The fact that these two were able to be replaced by two other greats, Copping and Crayston, meant that success continued from 1930 while the failure to replace James and Jack and also the two wingers Hulme and Bastin were factors in the eventual disintegration of the team. So the glory decade began with the FA Cup win of 1930, League Championship in 1931, 2nd in League 1932, League Champions 1933, League Champions 1934; League Champions 1935; FA Cup winners 1936; 3rd in League 1937; 1938 League champions; 1939, 5th in League; 1940 Football League suspended for duration of war.

Before these triumphs, however, the worst sort of disaster struck Arsenal. Herbert Chapman died very suddenly and unexpectedly on Saturday 3rd. January 1934. Chapman had developed a heavy cold and his doctor had advised that he should not undertake his final journey which was to Guildford to watch the third team on the previous Wednesday. He returned home to Hendon and appeared somewhat better the next day, but pneumonia quickly developed, for which there was no cure in those days. The players first learned of Chapman's death from newspaper placards as they came to the ground for the match. I was one of those who came to the ground to do my day's stint as a groundsboy. I was 15 years old and still at

school. The whole atmosphere was one of numbness and stunned disbelief. The opponents that day were Arsenal's great rivals Sheffield Wednesday and the 1-1 draw seemed to last not 90 minutes but for ever.

Chapman's death was so sudden that there could not be any question of a replacement. In fact the club was run on a day to day basis by Joe Shaw, Tom Whittaker and John Peters all highly competent Arsenal personnel. The eventual solution was very clever and prevented disruption. George Allison was appointed manager at the end of the 1933-34 season. Allison was a director of Arsenal, but his fame rested on his appointment by the BBC to the post of radio commentator for football and he commentated on both the 1927 final and the 1930 one despite being an Arsenal director. The club therefore became Allison's Arsenal and its success had become routine. It was under Allison that two of the most famous Arsenal events occurred. The first was the infamous international against Italy in November 1934 when seven Arsenal players, Wilf Copping, Ray Bowden, George Male, Frank Moss, Ted Drake, Eddie Hapgood and Cliff Bastin played. England triumphed 3-2 in a vicious match which saw the Arsenal dressing room resembling a battlefield. The other incident was in December 1935 when Drake scored his seven goals against Aston Villa.

But the seeds of dissolution had been sown. Other teams such as Aston Villa, Sheffield Wednesday, Everton and Wolves under the redoubtable Major Buckley were challenging Arsenal whose final blunder was to buy Bryn Jones from Wolves as a replacement for Alex James which never came off. By the time that the second World War broke out in 1939, Arsenal were paying the price for their confidence in building the West Stand, and just as in World War 1, Arsenal entered World War 2 massively in debt and the future of the club in doubt.

Who was it, however, who appointed Chapman, and can well claim to be the real architect of Arsenal's fame? This was Henry Norris, a flamboyant businessman in real property with a penchant for legislation which was eventually to prove his undoing. Norris owned Fulham FC and was mayor of Fulham for seven years. He was knighted in 1917 and MP for Fulham East from 1918 to 1922. He was therefore a man of very wide contacts and influence. Norris had conceived the idea that a London club should challenge the superiority of the north and midlands. He therefore bought Arsenal in 1910 when the Club was Woolwich Arsenal and in severe financial difficulties. Norris believed that Arsenal could not prosper at Plumstead and that it should move nearer to central London. Norris eventually paid £20,000 for a lease of only 21 years. The first game was played at Highbury in 1913. In 1914 war broke out and a team with close connections with Woolwich Arsenal disintegrated as the team and supporters turned to war work. By 1918 the club had an overdraft of £60,000 and was clearly bankrupt

Norris survived these financial disasters and in 1919 accomplished one of the three main feats for which he will always be known. The first was to persuade the League authorities to include Arsenal as one of the two new members in the project to raise the total number of clubs in the first division to 22 from 20 despite of the fact that Arsenal had finished fifth in Division 2 in 1914-15. It was an audacious plan and only a man with Norris's influence and contacts could have brought it off. Norris's next coup was to persuade the railway authorities to change the name of the adjacent tube station from Gillespie Road to Arsenal. This also appeared impossible and perhaps only Norris could have achieved it. The third great feat of Norris was to appoint Herbert Chapman manager in 1925, although success was not to be achieved until 1930. Before that, however, Norris's influence had been brought to an undeserved end. The Football League had held an enquiry into irregular payments and although supposedly secret it was published by the Daily Mail. It alleged that Norris' chauffeur had been paid for by the club and also the chauffeur's car; that the team bus had been sold and the money had made its way to Norris's wife. Norris promptly sued the FA for libel. The case went to the High Court, but in 1929 the FA were victorious and they promptly excluded Norris from any future contact with football. So ended the football career of a man whose offences were of a minor character in unregulated days when most clubs were committing similar irregularities on the eve of Arsenal's rise to fame and fortune. Norris died six months after Chapman in July 1934 worth £71,733: in today's prices this self-made man was a millionaire.

And so we come at last to Arsene Wenger. He was appointed Arsenal manager at the beginning of the season in August 1995. The man who was sacked to make way for him, Bruce Rioch, had begun to overcome the insularity of the times and had already signed foreign players. The first was Dennis Bergkamp who cost £7.5 million. The committee which took over from Rioch bought Patrick Viera for £3m and he joined Arsenal at the same time as Wenger at the beginning of the season. Arsenal had remained one of the great clubs in Britain after 1945 when the continuance of the maximum wage and full employment made the owners of many clubs affluent. But Arsenal's predominance in the post-war years had to be shared with other clubs and superiority acceded to Manchester United, Liverpool and Leeds not to mention the maverick genius Brian Clough.

Whatever happened to Arsenal, however, is nothing compared with the fate of Wolves. In 1948 Stan Cullis was appointed manager and the 1950s proved the greatest period in the club's history with FA cup wins in 1949 and 1960 and League championship wins in 1953-4, 1957-8 and 1958-9. And then there were the floodlit games when Wolves took on and beat the might of Hungary and Russia. No wonder there was a certain amount of good natured banter when I came to Wolverhampton in 1954 and it was discovered that I was an Arsenal supporter!

But catastrophe beyond belief was in store for Wolves. In 1964 Stan Cullis's contract was controversially ended and Wolves spent the next two years in the second division. Some recovery followed, but in 1982 the Bhatti Brothers took control of the club and it sank in successive seasons from the first to the fourth division. The club was saved from extinction in 1986 by the town council purchasing the ground. In May 1998 Sir Jack Hayward bought the club for an estimated £20m and developed the wonderful stadium they now inhabit. But all the money invested on players by this super rich supporter of the club yielded the desired result of promotion to the Premiership only in 2002-3. By this time Hayward had stated that he would invest no more money in the club and within one season Wolves were relegated to the second division (now called the Coca-Cola Championship), where they still languish.

We can now return to Arsenal and Arsene Wenger. Success came early to Wenger with an Arsenal double in 1997-8. He inherited a team basically built by George Graham who was sacked for financial irregularities and sentenced to one year out of football (shades of William Norris) after which he joined Leeds as manager. Bruce Rioch became manager in his stead and he it was who bought Bergkamp and Viera and thus embraced the two modern trends of purchasing both foreigner and blacks. This team represented national trends however, in a much more fundamental way. Two of the players, Tony Adams and Allan Merson were alcoholics. Tony Adams served a prison sentence. But both he and Merson fought back against these problems and Adams showed exceptional character in eventually becoming both the captain of Arsenal and also England. It was political, and the end of any pretence that England had a God given right to dominate the world of football. Arsene Wenger represented the new multicultural world of the future. Perhaps his first social achievements were in the area of fitness and diet which also involved 24 hour control of footballers, and the end of idleness and booze.

But it was not long before Wenger was challenging the very basis of English football epitomised in the aphorism of the Liverpool manager Bill Shankley that football is more than a matter of life and death! Wenger challenged this by stating that football was only a game, and its first duty was to entertain. So in this new world of global football out went criticisms of '1-0' and 'Lucky Arsenal' in favour of the attacking football which culminated in the sublime performances seen at the end of season 2003-4 and the beginning of 2004-5 of the irrepressible sweep of Henry, Pires, Bergkamp, Ljungberg supported by Viera and Ashley Cole which we may never see again.

As a result of winning the Double Wenger became coach of the year and turned his attention to further developing ties with the community. One is Health for Life; a project for over 16s and adults. Another is Soccer Schools where school teams are coached and trained. Then there is No Smoking at Highbury which will be continued at the new stadium. Also the Good Causes Policy which supports charities

favoured by the club. One of the most important initiatives is the support for local schools by giving its name and support to the Key Stage 2 to 4 examinations. Of course all clubs have similar community programmes whose ulterior purpose is to discover young talent, but I suggest that Arsenal spend more money integrating the club into the community than any other club.

Above all there is the anti-racism of Arsenal. This is related to the Let's Kick Racism out of Football inaugurated in 1993 by the Commission for Racial Equality and the Professional Footballers' Association. Since 1997 the campaign has become independent of the CRE under the new title of Kick it Out. Its present aims are not only to eradicate racism from professional football but also to develop educational resources in schools, colleges and youth organisations to eradicate racism in the Parks. The problems of Asian and Black participation in clubs and also racism in European football are also tackled. In too many clubs racism is not taken seriously in a period when racism in the country is increasing. Arsenal's multicultural players and supporters have set the example by raising Kick-it-Out posters over a quarter of the ground and now the Arsenal team has become the first to wear the two part badge on their shirts 'Speak Up' and 'Stand Up' denouncing racism. This, it seems, is an individual initiative of Thierry Henry.

But this is only a part of the influence that Wenger has had on British football. He has seen the emergence of two craggy, proletarian characters in Harry Redknapp and Sam Allardyce who have learned to deal with English and foreign players at various stages of their career when they can be bought for a song and thus compete with the richest of clubs. Indeed Allardyce's Bolton have recently defeated Arsenal and this could lead to a general decline of Arsenal who are short of money while their new ground is being built and will need at least two years after that to acclimatise themselves to their new ground. So Arsenal have been broke twice since their unexpected rise in the 1930s and there could be a third time. Other Premiership managers have also had to learn to build multicultural sides, since sides taken from the whole world of soccer will normally be better than a purely national side. And foreign players are anxious to play in England with its competitive and vigorous game. Wenger has thus played a major role in opening out the Premiership so that success could come to one of a dozen clubs.

But of all the clubs in Britain Wenger's Arsenal is the most truly cosmopolitan. His protégé, Thierry Henry has become, like his former team mate Ian Wright powerful voices in protest against racism on the terraces. Like David Beckham he has also become a fashion icon tapping into the immense fashion market led by black youth. He is a leading figure in the integration of Britain into the global world of multiculturalism. With Wenger he is a powerful international figure against the racism of football which inevitably continues to rear its ugly head both in Britain and abroad. As world footballer of the world, as he should have been last year, Henry has become part of the political scene of this new world wearing, like the president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, the sweatshirt of Che Guevara.

At the celebrations of player of the world award 2004 Henry found himself in Argentine. In that country they deny that Pele of Brazil is the greatest footballer who ever lived in favour of their own Maradona of the famous 'hand of God' goal. Maradona has gone on record as saying that after God the greatest man on earth for him is Fidel Castro and this is the symbolism of global multiculturalism. Cuba is the country that Bush would most like to invade, but bitter experience of past attempts show that this would result in too many body bags to be a rational proposition, although, of course, Bush is not rational.

Henry has now been appointed Ambassador for Football and this has been endorsed by the chief of the world body for football, FIFA. This is another straw in the wind that football cannot be separated from politics and this means support either for global capitalism or socialism.

My final remarks on the two other outstanding teams in Britain will illustrate this. Manchester United have taken the path of capitalism, but this leaves them wide open to global take over and in the recent period they have had to resist three offers by USA sports entrepreneurs. Sir Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager was once a Socialist and I hope he remains one for the only hope would seem

to be the taking over of the club by its supporters. The other example of Chelsea is the most blatant example of how the richest club in the world is buying itself football success with the money of a Russian oil oligarch. However Chelsea supporters wriggle and deny that this money has been stolen from the Russian people the ethics of the matter will continue to haunt the club even if it does buy them success, although the uncertainties of football may yet force them to seek another solution than that of Abramavitch's stolen billions.

Wenger and Arsenal seem to represent a third way. Since Chapman's death the club has been controlled by the most respectable of merchant bankers. But the last development of Highbury, the North Bank was financed by selling seats to its supporters who thus became 'shareholders' in the club. I would have been one of them if I had not moved to Wolverhampton. The new ground has been fully financed by capitalist banks, but the debt burden is such that the club will almost inevitably have to seek more democratic sources of cash from its supporters which will lead it in a socialist direction.

In conclusion, I Love Arsene Wenger because he takes charge of Arsenal at a time of fundamental global political change which will either favour US attempts to rule the world, with Blair holding on to Bush's coat tails, or sharing the efforts of the people of most of the world to change the world in what must be a socialist or even Communist direction.