

Match Report: Manchester City vs Manchester United

01/05/12

This will be a bit different from a normal match report because I didn't go, I watched it on the telly from a crowded pub in Watford, peering through the fronds of the perm belonging to the man standing an inch from my crotch. I remember the day when all footballers had perms, especially ones from Watford. The terraces must have been a nightmare for people of average height, such as myself, during the 1980's.

Anyway, I digress. It's Manchester derby time, and according to who you speak to the most important match in the history of the world, ever. I must level with you here, I've missed pretty much the whole of the rest of the season although I have caught the odd score on the live update shows, when I've been tuning in to see how many Plymouth Argyle are losing by that particular weekend.

Fear not, for this does not make me unqualified, because I have watched a lot of football and I know more about it than even Roy Hodgson. I am an expert. My apathy of late is something that happens, I suspect, as you get older.

So, I went to the pub. Now, I remain convinced that the reason Ian Holloway appeared to improve vastly as a manager in between leaving QPR and arriving at Plymouth Argyle manager was largely down to spending the entire period of his gardening leave solidly playing Football Manager. It was the triple substitutions at half time that were the clincher for me – I'd never seen a manager do that in real life before. This is, trust me, loosely linked to my complete summary of the first half. It appeared that Sir Alex Ferguson had been glued to box all week watching Chelsea bore the hell out of Barcelona, because he tried to do the same thing. And whilst I and everyone else in the pub were certainly bored rigid, unlike Barcelona City did happen to have the odd player taller than 5'6, and subsequently and entirely predictably managed to score from a set piece. That was pretty much all that happened as far as I can remember. And it was only a day ago.

Now before I carry on I must clarify another important point here. You may think that my cynicism and boredom relating to this game is because I am used to some flowing brand of champagne football one could not realistically expect from a title decider. This is unfair. The last game I even watched on telly was Plymouth vs Stourbridge in an FA cup first round replay. This was subsequently described by one contributor to the Plymouth Argyle messageboard thus:

"Not just the worst performance I've ever seen from a Plymouth Argyle team, but the worst performance by ANY team EVER."

It wasn't a great watch. But this game was even worse. It was worse because I'd gone to the pub after a really tough day at the office, I'd invested my time in dodging perms and the toweringly tall guy who always stands right in front of me wherever I go. I spent the obligatory four quid on a beer. I went to watch two teams I couldn't give two shits about because they were supposed to be quite good. I wanted to be entertained, I wanted to experience joy, drama, excitement. As it turned out I wished I was watching Wigan instead.

It was so dull that a lot of people who had stepped outside for a fag at half-time didn't bother coming back in again – presumably because they had something better to do, even in Watford. I had to stay just in case. I remember the miracle of Istanbul.

The second half was dull as well. There's only so many times you can watch Nani give the ball to the opposition or run it into touch without losing interest, or the will to live. The result – well, who cares? Nobody in the pub cared. There was a collective shrug and then everyone went home.

Is the Premier League bullying the life out of the game? Has the pain of being a Plymouth Argyle fan these last 3 difficult years left me jaded and traumatised? Am I just getting old? All of these things, I'd say. These players, these top players, they don't belong to the fans any more. They belong to the

sponsors and the agents and they serve their own interests. I watched Man City celebrate, then I watched their fans celebrate, and I wondered, must it all feel a bit hollow to them? It must do. How can you be fully behind any team containing characters such as Samir Nasri and Carlos Tevez? I'm sure they would rather take either of their promotions back to the top flight, with players like Kevin Horlock and Andy Morrison dragging them up by their bootlaces. It must have meant more seeing ex-Rotherham striker Sean Goater stick it away than any of their current crop of ludicrously overpaid and mercenary superstars. I hope so, anyway.

Maybe not. Argyle could have a front three of Pol Pot, Idi Amin and Warren Joyce funded by stolen Nazi gold and I guess I wouldn't care as long as we finally had someone who could score 30 goals a season.

But even then there is more glory in snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, more perverse pleasure to be gained in being robbed and wronged. Even when England went one nil up against Germany at Euro '96 I remember feeling a bit cheated at how easy it all seemed. After decades of strife true City fans must feel very odd this morning

English football fans are weird.