

Football fans should stand together.

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There seems to be little sympathy for Portsmouth and their fans this week, not least amongst other football supporters. It makes me think that it's time to take a step back.

It's kind of hard to explain what football's all about to someone who couldn't care less. Sometimes I find it hard to understand myself, am forced to question my strange obsession. I never manage to come up with any satisfactory answers, but I'm going to have a good go at it here.

When you're a kid, football is like being in a gang. It's the side you take when you're wrestling in the playground, it's a way of belonging, or not. It's a bit like that. It's something you play, something you do every day, from the first time some well meaning other sticks a ball at your feet. Tennis balls, flat balls with tooth marks that a dog's been at, egg shaped balls run over by a car. On the street, in the playground, down the park, in your living room when no-one's paying attention. Wherever. So you end up watching it as well.

If you're of a certain age, you may remember it used to be on the telly as well. Back when satellite TV was a mythical way of receiving German pornography. I remember watching Southampton vs Forest in about 1990 and it being one of the finest games I've ever seen. That was surprising at the time. Cup games that went to second replay, bushy moustaches everywhere, players who could just as well be your Dad.

In the end, the players are supposed to represent you. That's the point. Whichever team you choose, even if you live in Surbiton and support Manchester United, you've still nailed your colours to the mast. Guys need that stuff for some reason. It's the same for everyone. Even if you pretend not to know who Wayne Rooney is or that the World cup isn't happening, you're still forming your own faction, it still goes beyond indifference.

It gets a bit more serious when you start actually going to matches. Suddenly the game isn't confined to a TV box or a park, there's this amazing theatre with all the drama played out in front of you. It's interactive, you're part of the game in a different way. Huddled in a group on the terrace where the singers are, screaming your lungs out together, you become part of it. I'm sure there isn't a person in the world who really believes that 'Plymouth Argyle FC are by far the greatest team the world has ever seen', but you mean it when you sing it. You come home with your throat sore, people stopping their cars and asking you the score. There's the actual smell of turf, the wild celebrations when you score, the heavy silence of defeat. There's little sketches playing out all over the pitch – players laid bare and human – it could be you out there, it's the same game you play every week. Pushes and elbows and trips and shirt-pulls and laughing at the fat goalie and abusing the left back for

90 minutes because he looks a bit rubbish. It's like panto or a soap opera; the game is secondary.

In the end, that's why you go. Not because you're watching Brazil circa 1970, but because of the pride you feel. This team becomes yours, every inch of turf, every seat, every railing, every step on the terrace is part of you. The smoke and obstructed views, the abusive guy at the back, the man who belches loudly during lulls in play. Well maybe not so much them. Seeing the floodlights and hearing the crowd as you walk up to the ground, that buzz and excitement as the stadium fills up, trying to guess the crowd. Nothing is comparable. It's really quite profound.

You feel all this. You go every other week and you take it for granted. But as you grow up and your life changes and you move on you realise it has all changed again. Football becomes the only way to take your home with you. Away days become a pilgrimage. Wherever you go, whatever shithole field in whatever backyard of Blighty you find yourself, one end or stand or shed will be a little part of home. Familiar faces and accents you don't hear for half the year, the black humour and terrace camaraderie. Hiding your colours in train station pubs, and the occasional half time Bovril. Singing your heart out because you want to whole world to know, who you are and who you represent. Talking to total strangers wearing whatever colours on the train, because you're all sharing the same thing.

Dislocation is a bitch, as are all-seater stadia. The game has changed and the money in it is a joke. Every single Championship club these days either fails or teeters on the edge of oblivion just struggling to keep up with the Joneses. It's not the oligarchs or the chancers with their eyes on some mythical prize or lucrative property deal who suffer though. They walk away from clubs which they have leveraged to the hilt and go back to their day jobs, like a kid walking away from a broken toy. Sure they may be certain pubs they can't go in any more, and they forfeit the use of the director's box, but they don't care. A little water clears us of the deed.

The supporters of any club in trouble can't be held accountable for that. Like so many things, it's impossible to explain until you've been there. I empathised with my mate who supported Wimbledon when they disappeared to Milton Keynes, but I didn't understand, not until last year. Not until the unthinkable happened and the 'best run club in the Championship' suffered a disastrous change of ownership and two successive relegations, driving them to the foot of the Football League and the brink of extinction.

The day the CVA for Plymouth Argyle was agreed I had to lock myself in the office toilet, for a bit of a weep. I know. Tears and emotions, relief and anxiety. This part of me, this link to my identity and my community, this constant of my life, this piece of who I am, was far from safe. But we had a chance.

It would be nice to get to the Premiership one day. That is our dream. But all football fans should be careful what they wish for. Today I don't care what league we're in or how bad we are, as long as we exist. And although it hurts to see players

leave, it doesn't hurt half as much as the alternative would. On Tuesday night I can stand on the terrace at Kingsmeadow and reflect on what I have rather than what I have lost. I still have this part of me.

People say that Portsmouth fans should not complain. That they were not complaining when they won the FA cup. But if you can, take a look at the figures and the losses some clubs are running at, and think about what you are saying. As fans, we are the victims; of the money, of the spiralling wage costs and expectations, of the just in time I want it now era we live in. We're all in the same boat in the end. Next time, it could be you.