

What's the "It" in *Kick It Out*: Racism, Self-Organisation and British Football

Last month, on October 28, a *Daily Mail* headline read: "Rio's Back on Board". Reflecting the collective sigh of relief from much of football's elite, the article explained that a week earlier, Rio Ferdinand (Manchester United) had refused – along with several high-profile black players – to wear a promotional anti-racism t-shirt from the organisation *Kick It Out*. For a brief moment, sport media revelled in the idea that the blacks were finally "back on board" and ready to sail back into postracial harmony, but then Mark Clattenburg happened, and racism remained an unwelcomed blot on the back pages.

Over the past year, professional football has seemed unable to steer clear of racism-infested waters: Luis Suárez (Liverpool) was banned for eight matches and fined £40,000 for racially abusing Patrice Evra (Manchester United) on the pitch; Chelsea's John Terry was charged and cleared of a racially aggravated public order offence against QPR's Anton Ferdinand, but was subsequently found guilty by the Football Association (FA), who handed down a four match ban and £220,000 fine; Anton Ferdinand received death threats and a bullet in the post for his action against Terry; several current and former players were mercilessly targeted by racists via social media; two convictions were made for football-related racist tweeting; England's Under-21s were racially and physically abused in Serbia; Oldham Athletic's Lee Croft was investigated by the police and cleared for calling a fourteen year old Sheffield United's ball boy a nigger¹; the police and FA launched an investigation into allegations of racial abuse towards Shrewsbury Town players Marvin Morgan, Jermaine Grandison and Bolton Wanderers' Marvin Sordell²; questions were raised about the possibility of organising – what the press termed – "a breakaway union for black players"; police arrested a man suspected of directing a monkey taunt at Manchester

¹ Lee Croft accepted he spoke "inappropriately" to the ball boy and later apologised for his behaviour and "any upset that was caused as a result". The press reported that the apology was accepted, and no further police action was deemed necessary.

² A police and FA investigation into Marvin Sordell's racial abuse led to the banning of a 13 year old boy from Millwall matches for the "foreseeable future". Days after Sordell reported his racial abuse by Millwall supporters, a mocked-up photograph of him was posted on his Facebook account showing a gun pointing towards his head, with blood splattered across his face and shirt. The accompanying message read: "dont fuck with the millwall". See, Daniel Taylor, 'Ignoring racism is a crime in itself – and not limited to Serbia', *Guardian*, 20 October, 2012, online.

United's Danny Welbeck; and referee Mark Clattenburg was investigated by the FA and the police for alleged racist abuse aimed at Chelsea's Mikel John Obi.

The Recent Past

This constellation of events compel us to push football out of its comfort zone and toward engagement with difficult questions of twenty-first century racism and social power within, and beyond football. Although black presence and overt racism in British football can be traced to the Victorian era,³ widespread concern about racism in football is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the late 1970s and 1980s, racist incidents directed at black players and black supporters – at all levels of football – were all too common.

It has been 30 years since Paul Canoville became the first black man to play for Chelsea. Of his debut entrance onto the pitch at Selhurst Park, Canoville recalled hearing, “loud individual voices through the noise: ‘Sit down you black cunt!’ ‘You fucking wog – fuck off!’ Over and over again. Lots of different people.” When Canoville finally mustered the courage to gaze into the crowd, he discovered that he had been targeted by his own side. The racist momentum quickly built amongst Chelsea supporters, and a huge mob burst into the chant: “‘We don’t want the nigger! We don’t want the nigger! La la la laaa, la la la laaa!’” Overwhelmed and without support, Canoville simply bowed his head as bananas began hurling towards him. Years later, he reflected: “Nothing would stop me living the dream as a professional footballer, but the cost almost killed me.”⁴

Such scenes are no longer commonplace, thanks in large part to the development of high-profile grassroots anti-racist measures, most notably, *Kick It Out*, which was launched at the beginning of the 1993/94 season as *Let’s Kick Racism Out of Football* (hereafter referred to as *Let’s Kick Racism*). As a matter of grave urgency, the Campaigns Unit at the Commission for Racial

³ For an excellent history of black footballers in Britain, see Phil Vasili, *Colouring Over the White Line: The History of Black Footballers in Britain* (Mainstream Pub., 2000).

⁴ Paul Canoville, *Black and Blue: How Racism, Drugs and Cancer Almost Destroyed Me* (Headline Book Publishing, 2008).

Equality (CRE) responded to prevalent racial harassment and violence – including racist chanting at football matches and mounting efforts by far-right wing groups to recruit individuals within and around stadia – through the development of *Let's Kick Racism*.⁵ Lord Herman Ouseley, chair of *Kick It Out*, recently noted that: “At a time when discrimination is high up the football agenda, it is easy for fans and players to forget the great strides made over the past 20 years in helping to eradicate it.”⁶ Indeed, the anti-racist initiatives implemented by *Let's Kick Racism* were critical interventions in the game, which certainly forced professional clubs to publicly disavow racism as a naturalised part of the game. However, we must be cautious with commonsense claims that British football has seen a decline in levels of racism.

While racist incidents in professional football are perhaps more likely to be intermittent, we must remember that racism often manifests itself in ways that are inconsistent and context specific. And while, for instance, we can acknowledge the passing of an era that saw bananas regularly thrown at John Barnes, and many more black Premiership footballers, we must equally lament that Micah Richards (Manchester City) was forced to close down his twitter account earlier this year after receiving sustained racist abuse for over three months. The danger of promoting simplistic narratives of racial progress in British football is that it works to conceal the fluidity and multi-dimensional nature of ever-adaptable *racisms*.

Indeed, the uncritical notion of decline in racism in football has been undermined by a recent ComRes poll for the *Sunday Mirror*, in which 46 per cent of football fans said there had been an increase in the number of racist incidents in the last five years. Over a quarter (28 per cent) of those polled believed that the FA was not taking the issue of racism seriously enough, whilst 32 per cent of respondents deemed the *Kick It Out* campaign to be “ineffective”.⁷ Such results are perhaps not that surprising, particularly as 24 per cent of supporters from Premiership clubs reported in 1999 that they had witnessed racist comments aimed at players.⁸ In addition, former Netherlands international, Patrick Kluivert, recently broke his silence about his 2004/05 season

⁵ Jon Garland and Michael Rowe, *Racism and Anti-Racism in Football* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 54.

⁶ ‘Biggest ever football racism survey to be launched by Kick It Out’, *Guardian*, 17 October, 2012, online.

⁷ ComRes interviewed 2,022 British adults online from October 31 to November 1, 2012, of which 815 respondents described themselves as having a great deal or a fair amount of interest in football.

⁸ Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research (2000), quoted in Garland and Rowe, *Racism and Anti-Racism in Football*, 4.

at Newcastle, when he admitted in a November 2012 interview for Goal.com that he was regularly subjected to “monkey” chants and other racial abuses by supporters during his time in the Premier League.

The forms of racism that exist within football are innumerable. Racism does not always manifest as a dramatic singular incident, but more often than not, racist practices are entrenched into the everyday and seemingly benign interactions. As black ex-professional footballer Richie Moran explained: “Casual use of racist invective in the dressing room or on the training ground is dismissed as ‘banter’, and ‘jokes’ about the size of your manhood and how it is directly related to the colour of your skin are almost relentless.”⁹ Even youth football is not immune to such “casual” discriminatory discourse, as Canoville recalled: “Chelsea staff would say little anti-black gibes all the time. For instance, when a new white kid joined the juniors, the coaches would nod towards the black guys and joke to the new boy, ‘Watch your valuables with this lot,’ and worse.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, far too few black players – former and current – are prepared to publicly break silences about the nature and extent of racism in British football. Moran took a stance against racism that no player should ever have to consider: he quit the game. The degrading combination of racism in his everyday working life – such as the frequent use of terms like ‘nigger’, ‘coon’ and ‘spade’ during training sessions – as well as regular racial abuse from supporters, led Moran to quit professional football, not because he could not tolerate the racist abuse, but because he felt he “*didn’t have to tolerate it.*”¹¹ For Moran, the message that players should “rise above” racism (read: don’t be proactive) is dangerously wrong because it leaves racism unchallenged and intact. Indeed, when football institutions legitimatise racially motivated discrimination, they are themselves complicit in further institutionalising racist acts.

⁹ Richie Moran, ‘Racism in Football: A Victim’s Perspective’, in *The Future of Football: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jon Garland, Dominic Malcolm, and Michael Rowe (London & Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 193.

¹⁰ Canoville, *Black and Blue*, 150.

¹¹ Moran, ‘Racism in Football: A Victim’s Perspective’, 194.

The Present

The question that now needs to be asked is whether *Kick It Out* – arguably the most high-profile anti-racism campaign – is equipped to deal with the complexities and contradictions of multiple *racisms* that are constantly being remade. It is perhaps quite apt that the demands of modern marketing and rebranding have seen *Kick It Out* replace “*Racism*” in their campaign slogan, with an innocuous and vague “*It*”. A new political anti-racism agenda needs to be able to challenge ever fragmented definitions of racism, and address its nuances *and* contradictions. Was *Kick It Out* effective in expelling the erroneous belief that neither Suárez nor Terry could be “racist” because of black ancestry and friendships? Simply put, *Kick It Out* failed to communicate that commonsense notions of racism are wholly inadequate, precisely because they over-simplify or ignore inherent contradictions within this particular system of power and privilege.

While the vast majority of society are perhaps on board with the *moral* message of the *Kick It Out* campaign, many of those same individuals would argue that directing racist language at a player is not racism enacted. The notion that racist abuse is nothing but “trash talk” that a player should just “dispose” of after the game is nothing new. In 1997, Wimbledon’s Robbie Earle commented: “It often intrigues me that when white players are abused by the crowd – Paul Gascoigne gets ‘you fat bastard’ all the time, Tony Adams used to get those dreadful donkey noises – you never see in-depth investigative reports into it.”¹²

Earle’s suggestion that racist abuse is no different from a personal insult is a commonly held assertion, and exposes the ways in which racism is effortlessly reproduced. Mainstream anti-racist campaigns such as *Kick It Out* rarely communicate that personal insults (albeit cruel and crude) and racist abuse are not equivalent. To make them comparable is to deny the specific context and history of racism. Racist language – as only one form of racism in the game – simultaneously reinforces and sustains white pre-eminence *and* the chronic disempowering of black people and other racialised groups within and beyond the game.

¹² Quoted in Garland and Rowe, *Racism and Anti-Racism in Football*, 45.

It would therefore not be a surprise to hear supporters, players, coaches, managers and administrators congratulate *Kick It Out* on the great job they have done in raising awareness about the evils of rogue racist actors and explicit right-wing racism. However, these same individuals and institutions also implicitly believe that it is not *Kick It Out's* place to regulate “banter” that might utilise racist language, but supposedly has no racist *intent*. As ritualised racism remains institutionalised for yet another generation, it is essential that anti-racist initiatives broaden their agendas to challenge responses to manifestations of racism within football. In part, this will mean focusing on the ways people enact racism, despite having no uniformed commitment to racism as an ideology.

The Future

I was recently invited to comment on a live radio show about Chelsea’s decision to go public with their FA complaint of alleged racial abuse by referee Mark Clattenburg. I began the conversation by quoting Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, who perhaps quite inadvertently exposed the current culture of football when he criticised Chelsea’s public allegation against Clattenburg. “I’m not a great believer in making these stories public” Wenger declared, adding: “One of the great things in sport is tolerance, forgiveness and *explanation internally*.” I spoke about how disturbing it was to hear such a senior and respected manager advocate for the continuation of a culture of secrecy, and that in twenty-first century football, we should be exulting qualities such as accountability, justice, and *transparency*. As a conciliatory measure, the radio host accepted that Wenger’s comments was perhaps a Blatter-like “gaff”¹³, but proceeded with a line of enquiry which suggested that the decision taken by Peter Herbert OBE – chairman of the Society of Black Lawyers – to report Clattenburg’s alleged racist abuse to the Metropolitan Police Service was inappropriate. I reminded the host that we were currently in the midst of the Jimmy Saville sexual abuse scandal, and that the media and other institutions were more than

¹³ FIFA president, Sepp Blatter, appeared to suggest during a CNN interview in November, 2011 that racial discrimination could be settled with a handshake.

aware of the dangers associated with organisational silence, yet quite contradictorily, this particular challenge to institutional concealment and complacency had not been welcomed.

The Society of Black Lawyers have not only been criticised for their involvement in the Clattenburg incident, but also for their recent efforts to facilitate the formation of a Black Players' Association. Football institutions and the media have condemned the idea as “divisive”, despite the fact that black professional associations are not a new or uncommon phenomenon. On the face of it, resistance to the notion of a Black Players' Association could simply be attributed to fears about losing authority and control, but such fears are shaped by historical notions of racial subjugation. Historically, black collectivity has been marked as suspicious, disruptive, and dangerous. It is not coincidental that alongside laws in America that banned black slaves from bearing arms, interracial marriage, and education, blacks were also prohibited from *congregating in large numbers*.¹⁴ The societal anxiety associated with black self-organisation has remained remarkably salient in our contemporary moment.

At first blush, it may seem irrational to believe that if black footballers decide to congregate in large numbers – under the auspices of a Black Players' Association – this will irreparably harm the game. Yet, it is not an issue of irrationality, but institutional racism. Formations of black and other racialised professional groups have historically been subjected to disproportionate levels of scrutiny. For example, in 1994, black police officers faced very similar objections to forming the Black Police Association (BPA) from multiple institutions, including the Metropolitan Police Service. Despite the challenges, black officers understood the necessity of creating a black professional association that would focus on the fair treatment and support of black colleagues, and contribute to the improvement of police/community relations: objectives that the Police Service had accepted in theory (if not in practice) for many years.

Kick It Out – in conjunction with the Professional Football Association (PFA) and the FA – have become increasingly ineffective. The formation of a Black Players' Association has the potential to use its collective cultural power to move debate beyond individualised accusations of racism,

¹⁴ For example, in 1680, the State of Virginia prohibited blacks from congregating in large numbers.

and generate a more open, frank, and diverse discussion that tackles issues of silencing and denial, as well as inclusion and racial equity within the institutions of football.

Richie Moran has noted that black footballers are often swayed by self-interest, but he sees no legitimate reason why “leading black and foreign nationals in the Premiership and beyond” do not make an uncompromising zero tolerance stand against racism. In addition, Moran has called upon black players to better engage with wider issues of racism, and recalls the shameful recent past which did not see “one leading black player make any statement about the Stephen Lawrence case or the 1999 bombings of communities in Brixton, Brick Lane and Soho.”¹⁵

Perhaps in this cultural moment, where issues are coming more into focus, there will be the “political will” from black players to engage deeper with a broader agenda concerned with ritualised racism in football, the under representation of black and Asian supporters, the absence of Asian professional players, the continuing presence of overt racism within grassroots football and the human trafficking and exploitation of young players from Africa to Europe.¹⁶ Perhaps Moran’s call to black professional footballers is finally being heard. After all, as Jason Roberts, Premier League player for Reading recently tweeted: “People expect us ‘to put up with it’. Those days are gone. We DEMAND to be treated with respect. We are not asking.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Moran, ‘Racism in Football: A Victim’s Perspective’, 194.

¹⁶ According to a report by Foot Solidaire (a French NGO), unregistered sports agents are recruiting young African football players and convincing them that they can play professional football in Europe. They charge exorbitant fees (frequently life savings) to bring a child to Europe, but often abandoned them upon arrival. Penniless, without proper immigration documentation or the possibility of obtaining valid work, these young players are often found homeless.

¹⁷ Quoted by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, ‘Rio Ferdinand was right not to wear the Kick it Out shirt – and he’ll pay for it’, *The Independent*, 21 October 2012, online.