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There was a collective will at work in Barcelona's stadium last Wednesday. And Martin Amis - after a long, strange trip - was just another face in the crowd

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We are all aware of the group ferocity of the football fan, and much has been written about its causes. What is it that makes the herd thunder on by - tribalism, alienation, lost empire? I have a simpler explanation. The roots of football mob-ism lie in football matches, and in what it is like to go and watch them.

Yes, I Was There for the fairytale, glory night on the magic field of impossible dreams. And, true, apart from the odd rumble over the forged tickets, it was a volatile but unviolent occasion (because we won) and the tabloids got their shots of sombreroed lads cavorting on Las Ramblas. For me, though, as I posed as an average United fan, the evening amounted to 90 seconds of incredulous euphoria sandwiched by 30 hours of torment. A few more experiences of that order and I would be down on the high street stoving in the shop windows, and sieving the internet (the herd's new playground) for lots more about Combat 18.

To feint sideways for a moment: the reason people who hate Man U hate Man U is that Man U are the future, and they have been the future for a very long time. It used to be said that the team was just a troupe of itinerant mercenaries with no local identity. But that description now serves for all the other clubs in the Premiership - while Man U have moved on.

The Reds have found new ways to be futuristic. They are computerised, digitalised, corporatised. They can afford to buy (Yorke, Stam); but their wealth has allowed them to circle back the other way and grow their own, with their astonishing youth-development machine: Beckham, Scholes, Neville, Butt.

That's the team. What about the fans? Widely travelled, and cosmopolitan anyway, are they similarly evolved? As I made my way to Stansted last Wednesday morning, I expected, or half-expected, to be mingling with a new elite, a strolling fraternity of football connoisseurs who had long transcended the lumpen peer-pressures of the herd.

Besides, if you don't hate Man U, and you like football, how could you fail to admire this Man U? Yorke, who floats and stings, the great Giggs, Scholes (the other team's worst nightmare, snorting, frothing, niggling), Keane (who, after gliding in the first comeback goal in Turin, simply tightened

his fist, and nodded, and pounded back upfield for the restart).

I used to say that all Cole's volleyed goals were, in actuality, attempts at a first touch; but he has turned himself into a genuine weapon-system, a great calibrator of weight and angle. Beckham has added hardness to his delicacy and dynamism. And how about Schmeichel? When all else fails he just stands and spreads, making himself as massive as neutronium, so that a blasted drive will rebound from the tip of his little finger. United vs Bayern was, in addition, England vs Germany. There were wounds to heal and scores to settle (Euro 96, Italia 90, World Wars I and II). But here also, surely, was a chance for excellence and the sober delectation of the beautiful game.

While the pampered impalas and burnished snow-leopards of the United squad had proceeded south by Concorde, a dawn start saw me in the departure lounge with the other patrons of Sports Mondial plc's 'private charter' to the Nou Camp. I did notice at least one fan-from-the-future: lean, tanned, thirtyish, with cupped mobile, gleaming shell-suit and twinkly trainers, and one of those wallet-pouches round the waist like an optional beergut. And that was it. Everyone else looked either dowdily anonymous or heavily club-merchandised. Many a red shirt featured, across the shoulderblades, the name of a club favourite. In the bar (at 10 in the morning) a BECKHAM sat slumped over a pensive pint of lager. In the McDonald's a KEANE enjoyed successive Big Macs.

All went well until the series of 'delays' confessed to by a Sports Mondial representative blossomed into a six-hour wait. The brochure had said, untruthfully, that the flight would be teetotal, but now there was plenty of time to down the 'few' with which the Englander typically steels himself for abroad. It was considered a bit much when the Caribbean steel band (what was that doing there?) started playing 'Viva Espa-a'. 'Are they taking the fucking piss or fucking what?' inquired the worst man in our party of his bro or cuzz, who was the next-worst man in our party. 'They lucky there's not a fucking winduh unbroken in this fucking place.'

By 2.30 we were on one of the two buses to the plane. Dispersed in the lounge, the fans were now, at least, half a herd. 'Ryan Giggs, Ryan Giggs, coming down the wing.' 'We shall not, we shall not be moved... We are going to win the fucking Cup [or, alternatively the fucking lot]. We shall not be moved. Re-Darmy, Re-Darmy, Re-Darmy...' Singing, or chanting, or bawling, is supposed to be one of the folklorish charms of the game; but musical anti-talent seems to be a sine qua non of the average fan. When we were grounded on the runway there was a pathetic attempt at a slow handclap. It sounded like scattered applause.

On the plane, of course, herd-dom was doubled, or squared. There was much hollered one-lining (typically a

TV tie-in soundbite with a fucking thrown in to guarantee the laugh). The clamour intensified when it was announced that we would land, not in Gerona, as advertised, but in Barcelona itself, to make up time. The buses that were meant to meet us were even now speeding to the airport, with our tickets on board. Rumour reeled drunkenly through the plane. The lowpoint was a chorus of 'Tickets at Stansted' sung to the tune of 'There's only one Keane-oh' (or, more remotely, of 'Guantanamera'). On disembarkation we were told that the buses were late. We journeyed to the rendezvous hotel in approximately 30 taxi cabs.

Outside the Juan Carlos I there was an altercation between an embattled rep and the next-worst man. The next-worst man, who had always looked as though he would soon have his shirt off, had his shirt off (What is it about bare-chestedness at football matches? More me? More this?) 'I know you're all fucked off but ...' 'Fucking right we're fucked off. Where's ah fucking tickets?' 'Things are fucked up because... ' 'The fucking tickets. Get the fuckers down line.'

It was now an hour before kick-off. The forecourt jostling had quickly produced a police presence, and the police did some jostling of their own. I went and sat on the grass. A policeman told me to get off the grass. Policemen told everyone to get on the grass. Policemen told everyone to get off the grass. When the tickets arrived it was proposed that they be dispensed in alphabetical order. 'Amis!' Feeling sorry for the fans, if any, called Zygmunt, I hurried off, arriving sweat-soaked at the stadium in time for 10 minutes of the duster-twirling cheerleaders, the diva in the golfcart, and Freddie Mercury on the twin screens like a phantom of the opera, his voice lost among the raw throats of 90,000 souls.

Every time it strikes me, with all the freshness of revelation: going to a football match to watch a football match is the worst way to watch a football match. I had a good seat and a lucky one, not up there in the realms of nosebleed and brain haemorrhage, but down in the corner from which all three goals were fashioned and scored. Still, it's not, or not only, that the more distant action is hopelessly flattened and foreshortened. Whenever anything happens anywhere, everyone stands up, and you're obliged to rubberneck through a shifting collage of hair frizz and earring. But no matter.

The crowd is the engine of this experience. It is asking something of you: the surrender of your identity. And it will not be opposed. It cannot be opposed. The crowd is a wraparound millipede of rage and yearning, with the body heat of 180,000 torched armpits, with its ear-hurting roars, and that incensed whistling like a billion babies joined in one desperate scream.

Five minutes from time a fat red shirt stalked past making the tosser sign and, for emphasis, yelling: 'Fucking wankers!' No one followed him. And how unforgettable it

was, in those last minutes, to be caught up in the fabulous lurch of emotion, when hatred and despair became their opposites. Stranger turned to stranger with love and triumph. All were lost in the great red sea.

When, before the match, I asked a Sports Mondial plc rep for directions to the coach, I was told I would find it 'outside' the stadium. (Imagine: after the carnival you will find the coach 'outside' Notting Hill.) The win made this wholly dispiriting task much easier. After a while I linked up with a red-shirted father and his red-shirted son. They were a lot more hardened and stoical than I was. 'Let's have a wander down here,' said the dad, as we began a futile 80-minute trudge through a fuming buspark. Three hours later, legless with inanition, I spotted the frazzled rep and we finally climbed on board.

Sports Mondial subjected us to only two more vagaries: a 50-minute tour of Barcelona before we chanced upon the Gerona road, and a controversial M-way rest-stop to ease the boiling bladders of a BECKHAM and a STAM. Then they delivered us to the general disaster of cynicism and contempt (and Spanish paranoia) that awaited us at the airport. Here, perhaps 2,000 fans were being forced to spend the rest of the night in the carpark, sleeping in heaps. One old man, contemplating a shivering child, repeatedly intoned, with deliberation and justice. 'They're treating ooze ... like foogging shite.' And they were, too. Flightload by flightload we crossed the police line - and slept in heaps in the departure lounge. At last the call came: 'RN240. Destinationuh Esstansted.' The plane landed six hours late.

When you talk to a member of the crowd he immediately becomes an individual. This didn't work with the worst man and next-worst man, who would not disclose themselves and remained hard-eyed. They were fizzers, part of that 'tiny minority' you keep hearing about, and if United hadn't won they would have made somebody pay. Everyone else in my party submitted to the herding with resignation and dour humour. 'What if we'd lost?' I asked a fan, as we surveyed the human desolation of the carpark. 'Well it doesn't bear thinking about,' he said. 'Does it?'

All cheerfully agreed that it had been 'a crap match', apart from injury time and its immortal drama. 'Great result. But crap match.' Last season, when Arsenal pipped United 3-2 at Highbury, Alex Ferguson said: '[at this level] You don't expect to concede a goal from a corner.' What about two corners, in 90 seconds, at this level? As expected, United missed their chain of steel in midfield, Keane and Scholes; possession was insufficiently secure, and the passing game never happened. But this team really believes that it can do it on will. The crowd believed it; and Bayern (after the substitution of Matthaus) felt it still coming at them and were unhinged by it.

The crowd cannot join with the team in skill or athleticism, but they can be part of its will. I have felt the ugly and

atavistic lusts of the football fan, and they disquiet me. Nationalism doesn't explain it, though it gave me harsh pleasure to see those Germans with their faces in the mud. The ref had to help some of them to their feet for the restart; they were gone, dead. And the powerless man, by giving his identity to the Jupiter of the crowd, has helped administer this slaughter. Soon he must return to the confines of his mere individuality. But for 90 minutes - 90 seconds - he has known prepotence.

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