

## FOOTBALL

## A beautiful shame

In 1989, British football hit rock bottom. Twenty years later, Jason Cowley has woven a fresh, moving memoir around its nadir and subsequent transformation, says *Dominic Sandbrook*

**The Last Game**

By Jason Cowley (Simon & Schuster, £14.99)

It is often said that *Fever Pitch*, Nick Hornby's memoir of life supporting Arsenal, transformed British attitudes to our national game. Published in 1992, the year that England's leading clubs broke away to form the Premier League and Sky Sports began broadcasting regular games, it sold more than a million copies. For the first time in years, a man who seemed like a "proper" writer—a Cambridge graduate, no less—had taken football seriously, had treated it with love and respect. And it wasn't long before the backlash. "Before *Fever Pitch* we could pay at the turnstiles, stand on the terraces and watch a fight," *The Times* grumbled recently in a piece naming Hornby as the world's fourth worst famous football fan, one place ahead of Osama bin Laden. "After *Fever Pitch* we have to pay £50, sit next to a solicitor and give Sky £40 a month."

Although Jason Cowley, like Nick Hornby, followed Arsenal long before football became fashionable, standing on the Highbury terraces during the dark days of festering toilets and long-ball football, his career would have been very different without the game's dramatic transformation into an emblem of free-market globalisation. An English graduate from the University of Southampton, casting around for something to do at the beginning of the 1990s, Cowley got his break in freelance journalism with an interview with Arsenal's Alan Smith published in the magazine *Ninety Minutes*. The magazine was "breezy, smart, humorous, laddish," Cowley writes. "It seemed to understand the direction in which the game was moving."

Breezy, smart, humorous: all words that apply to the glossy magazine Cowley himself edited for five years, *The Observer Sport Monthly*, as well as to the broader culture of football at the turn of the millennium. Yet one of the achievements of Cowley's elegant *The Last Game* is to remind us how unlikely all this once seemed. When Cowley first went to watch games with his father in the mid-1970s, the prevailing atmosphere was one of sweaty, dirty, aggressive masculinity, unleavened by namby-pamby notions like safety or

comfort. "Even behind us, in the seats, where the wealthy and more responsible fans were supposed to be," Cowley writes, "I remember seeing men fighting before and during the game."

What had happened to football by the 1970s, of course, was a consequence of broader social and cultural changes beyond the reckoning of the game's administrators: the expansion of leisure, the decline of traditional working-class culture, the disappearance of the older fans who had always acted as restraining influences, the cancerous spread of violence on and off the field. As each year brought new atrocities and new shame, it seemed that football could not go any lower. But it did not touch bottom until April 1989, when 96 Liverpool fans were crushed to death at the FA Cup semi-final at Hillsborough, the victims less of negligence and incompetence on the part of the police than of a broader climate of fear in which supporters were caged like animals to stop them invading the pitch.

Six weeks after Hillsborough, having won the FA Cup, Liverpool faced Arsenal at Anfield needing only to avoid defeat by two goals to clinch the league title. Unusually, because games had been cancelled after the disaster, the match was played on a Friday; unusually, too, it was broadcast live. No scriptwriter could have planned a more compelling denouement, for if Arsenal could win 2-0, then they would be champions instead. Unbelievably, the Londoners managed it. The match was in injury time when Arsenal swept the ball from back to front and their midfielder, Michael Thomas, alone with only the keeper to beat, lifted the ball into the net and Arsenal to the championship.

For Cowley, this was the moment when football changed for ever: a cathartic release, a symbol of the game's pride and honour, as 40,000 Liverpool fans—not just aching with defeat and disappointment, but shattered by Hillsborough—stayed behind to applaud their conquerors. It was as if they understood, he writes, "that there would be no returning to

the ways of old." And indeed there would not; within months, work was underway to transform the crumbling terraces.

It is often said that football lost its soul in the transformation to a new era, and it is true that when you visit Arsenal's cavernous new stadium—with its almost cinema-style seating, ubiquitous Coke-and-burger outlets and soulless, Americanised atmosphere—the spirit of Herbert Chapman, the club's first great manager back in the 1920s, seems a long way away. It did not, moreover, have to be like this: there are plenty of different ways to organise a contest. For all their faults, American sports ensure a level of fair competition that now seems lost to English football. Or there's the German model, where ticket prices are much cheaper and many clubs are based on a membership principle, rather than being sold off to Russian and Arab billionaires. In England, football has become, as Cowley puts it, "a game defined by egoism, rapacity and greed"—although at least it no longer kills its aficionados.

Near the end of *The Last Game*, Cowley reflects on what his father, who died in 1991, would make of football today. That he uses his book as a vehicle to contemplate family, filial love and the sweet pain of nostalgia is itself an indication of how things have changed. Forty years ago, a man who broke off from describing a football match to discuss his relationship with his father would be regarded as eccentric at best and deeply suspect at worst. But

Cowley handles the subject with grace; the section on his father's sudden death, which must have been terribly hard to write, is beautifully touching. There is much more to this book, in fact, than football. In the age of Cristiano Ronaldo and Ashley Cole it is a sign that football has not quite lost its soul—if it can inspire a book as lucid, moving and emotionally literate as this.

*Dominic Sandbrook is the author of "Never Had it So Good" (Abacus) and is finishing a book on the 1970s*

