



WHAT'S OCCURRING

# IAN HOLLOWAY

With so much power vested in owners at the top of English football, its clubs below are putting themselves at risk by chasing the dream. But with this imbalance, says our columnist, how will we ensure everyone's survival?

I've played and managed at every level of English football, including the Premier League – and it's been an honour and a joy to have spent my life doing that. But I'm also worried about this wonderful game, because some people at the top have too much power they're trying to wield for their own means.

What they don't realise – or at least didn't before last season – is that this game still belongs to the people and always will. Even if you can't play it, you can become part of something as long as you live. Some owners are trying to make clubs their businesses, for personal profit, but they'll always be about their communities first.

We saw last year what powerful people are capable of with those plans for the Super League, and you have to wonder where they're going next. They'll try something like it again, and I don't trust them in the slightest. If I had any power, I'd be doing what I could to make sure they can't fleece what isn't theirs to fleece, just because they own something at this particular moment in time. They're nothing more than custodians.

I do believe that the Premier League is the best in the world, but that's only because the rich are getting richer. There's too big a divide between leagues, because the distribution of money at the top of the game is a huge problem. Parachute payments try to equal things out, and the clubs that get relegated earn some money for the next three years. But they also encourage overspending in the Championship, which we're seeing so often now. And if you don't get back up in three years, what are you going to do after that? Everything is geared towards being all out or bust, and that can't be the way to go. What about if you're a club that doesn't get parachute payments? You can't bridge that gap. If you're a corner shop, you're trying to get by with your own income; trying to engage your local community wherever you can. But your budget isn't that of a major supermarket, who are also all trying to compete with each other.



**“YOU WONDER WHAT THESE OWNERS ARE GOING TO TRY NEXT. WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THEY CAN'T FLEECE WHAT ISN'T THEIRS TO FLEECE”**

worries me. Unless you take your selfish glasses off, you're never going to be part of a good solution for the game as a whole. As a player or manager, I was always accountable for what I did with any club I represented. Now it feels like football's owners at the top aren't – and that can't be right. Someone needs to change it, but as they've already proved, it can't be those who are in the game.

Somebody impartial needs to get involved, but there's no organisation tough enough to tell the Premier League what to do. They have to ask the owners of its clubs what they think for every key decision, so the system is completely flawed. Instead, I want to see an intelligent committee of people put together who can find a way forward that works for everyone in football – not just asking the people at the top who benefit massively and think that money is theirs.

So come on, government – take over. How can you argue with them?

If the money was distributed more fairly in English football, we surely wouldn't be seeing these disaster situations every season. It could go towards making the game more secure for the rest of its life, and I'll tell you why Premier League clubs should care about that – because they haven't always been in these positions and might not be again one day. I'd think about creating some serious laws and legislation after what some of these owners have tried to do recently, in doing their best to change the very fabric of our game; removing the element of competition to guarantee themselves more money each year. The only way to stop this cycle is to stop the greedy from making all the decisions.

Football isn't just a sport – it's much bigger than that. You might support our wonderful swimmer Adam Peaty in the Olympics, but you'll struggle to feel a part of what he's doing. In our game you're part of it every minute of every day, and there aren't many sports where you can live it, take it to work, laugh about it, cry about it and argue about it. It gives so much to so many people, and that's why it needs protecting at all costs.

So who can do it? Well, that's what

## NON-LEAGUE NEWS

## SALESMAN TO WEMBLEY FINALIST

Hereford's Afghan star Maziar Kouhyar thought he was finished. He was wrong...

**Two curtailed seasons have left many non-league players praying for a first uninterrupted campaign in what feels like an age – but new Hereford signing Maziar Kouhyar will be even happier than most.**

After joining the Bulls for good this summer, the 23-year-old is looking to complete his first campaign since 2017-18, after two serious injuries that laid him up until March 2020 – when the UK went into lockdown.

The former Walsall midfielder was left with little choice but to take jobs outside football, working initially at KFC before becoming a car salesman.

“There were no clubs available to go to, and I needed a job because I was just sitting at home doing rehabilitation on my own,” Kouhyar tells *FFT*. “When I was doing the car sales, I didn't even have an inkling that I was going to go back any time soon. I thought football was dead for me – I never thought for a million years that I'd be playing again.”

But after eight months working the showroom, Kouhyar's life was turned upside-down again. In March, he earned a short-term move to National League North side Hereford for a role

in their FA Trophy run. One whirlwind month later, he was wide-eyed and playing at Wembley.

“It was a crazy transition,” he says. “I was just thinking that I needed to get into football again, and suddenly there I was at Wembley. It was a very lucky situation – one that gives you the taste of where you want to be and drives you on.”

“When you're out for so long with injuries and other things, you really do appreciate everything when you get the chance to come back. Even the running we do or training – I look forward to it all. It's really enjoyable being around players and I don't take anything for granted any more.”

It was a rare high point for the seven-cap Afghanistan international, who fled the war-torn nation with his family as a one-year-old but made his debut for them in 2017. Alongside the injury struggles, Kouhyar's spell at Walsall ended under a cloud after he was called a terrorist by his own team-mate. However, he insists he can already tell the Black Lives Matter movement is having an impact.

“The progression starts within clubs and it has progressed a lot, so that

will subside very soon,” explains Kouhyar. “We want to spread it out to the fans and people watching the game as well. Obviously these people are a minority, but hopefully that will be abolished as well. I think football is moving in the right direction.”

Kouhyar is among a smattering of South Asian players in the English game, and after becoming the first Afghan to play professionally in the country following his breakthrough with the Saddlers, he has become something of an unwitting trailblazer for others hoping to follow suit.

“There are loads of other young Afghans in England who are making their way up,” he says. “They contact me on social media, we talk and become friends. It's not one of the things I think of all the time – I'm still a young player trying to make it myself. I haven't made it yet, but for the young kids seeing older Asian players, they think, ‘Oh my god, it is possible’. So if I'm in some way a bit of a role model, it's just an added bonus of playing football.”

And after the time Kouhyar's had, everything must feel like a bonus. **Chris Evans**

**“I THOUGHT FOOTBALL WAS DEAD FOR ME. THERE WERE NO CLUBS TO JOIN”**



Picture: Bc agency



CLAIMS TO FAME

CARDIFF CITY

### 1 CLEAN LIVING

Cardiff won the 1927 FA Cup and remain the only non-English club to do so. Hughie Ferguson was the hero in a 1-0 defeat of Arsenal, though the last touch came off Gunners gloveman Dan Lewis, who blamed his slippery new woollen jersey. The error inspired a lasting Arsenal tradition of washing their keepers' kits before every game.

### 2 REAL RATTLED

The Welsh Cup offered a handy route into the Cup Winners' Cup in 1971 – leading to victory over Real Madrid in their quarter-final first leg, as Brian Clark's goal saw off Miguel Munoz's giants at Ninian Park. They lost the return 2-0, but hey: still sounds good 50 years on.

### 3 IRANIAN INFLUENCE

Cardiff fans regularly implore their players to ‘do the Ayatollah’, a celebration of head-patting with both hands. The curious greeting first came to Ninian in 1990 and allegedly owes its roots to Welsh band U Thant, who were inspired by grievors doing it at the funeral of 1979 Iranian Revolution leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Obviously.

### 4 EARNIE'S ACCOLADE

Robert Earnshaw bagged 109 goals in 227 games for City, putting him third on the club's all-time top scorers list. Earnie is also the only man to have netted a hat-trick in all three Football League divisions, the League Cup and FA Cup (each for Cardiff), as well as the Premier League and for Wales. Busy boy.

### 5 RUDY AWAKENING

Cardiff are responsible for bringing Rudy Gesteau to English football from Metz in 2011... then crushing his hopes. The striker has only ever played three seasons in the Premier League, all of which have ended in relegation: first with the Bluebirds (2013-14, though he was quickly sent on loan), before two doomed spells at Aston Villa (2015-16) and Middlesbrough (2016-17). Give the guy a break.