

London Landscape

Football and alcohol: a short diary of a long and complex relationship

Edin Lakasing MBChB MRCS MRCGP

General Practitioner, Chorleywood Health Centre, Chorleywood, UK

Zul A Mirza MRCP MRCGP FFAEM

Consultant in Accident and Emergency Medicine, West Middlesex University Hospital, Isleworth, UK

Key messages

Football is a high profile sport with a close relationship with alcohol, and many elite players have had problems with addiction. This can help raise public awareness of problem drinking.

Keywords: addiction, alcohol, football

Why this matters to us

We encounter alcohol problems daily in our different perspectives as a GP and an Accident and Emergency Consultant. Both of us are avid football fans.

Football is unequivocally our national sport bordering, for many, on an obsession. Much of the coverage of footballers' off-the-field activity is, it must be acknowledged, not complementary, with alcohol frequently underpinning perceived or actual misdemeanours. The press often portray this as a new phenomenon, an inevitable consequence of the wealth enjoyed by modern players. This is, however, erroneous, for football and alcohol have a longer, more complex and more international relationship than is usually acknowledged. This forms a paradox for healthcare; sport (healthy) and alcohol (unhealthy in excess) are two worlds which collide, and some of the finest players ever seen have fallen victim to the demon drink.

A popular choice for the title of the world's best pre-WW2 player would be Giuseppe Meazza, of Inter Milan and the Italian national team that won successive World Cups in 1934 and 1938. Still the third-highest scorer in the Italian league, Meazza never behaved like an elite athlete, being allegedly fond of wine and admitting to occasionally sleeping in brothels before matches.

When international football resumed after the war interruption, the acknowledged foremost team was Hungary, whose captain, Ferenc Puskàs was acknowledged as one of the finest footballers ever, as notable for his interesting life as his lethal left-footed shot. Puskàs, however, liked beer and sausages, his ample girth and warm, engaging personality making him indeed resemble a friendly publican rather than a

sportsman. Defecting to the West after the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, he started a new career in Spain with Real Madrid, helping them become the foremost club side of the time, and regularly topping the scoring charts. He also enjoyed remarkable longevity as a player, playing until 40. He died in 2006 aged 79, though Alzheimer's disease blighted his last six years.

Brazil became the next nation to assume the mantle of the world's best national side. The World Cup winning teams of 1958 and 1962 contained the popular, chaotic and ultimately tragic figure of Garrincha. Of mixed African and Amerindian descent, he was born into grinding poverty and deformed, with his left knee curving out; nevertheless, he became a brilliant goalscoring winger for Rio's Botafogo team, easily the most skilled dribbler the game has ever seen. On the debit side he was a heavy drinker, evidently downing a bottle of *cachaça* each day of his adult life. Nor was that his only vice, for he is thought to have fathered at least 14 children by four different women. In retirement his drinking adversely affected his health, and he died from alcoholic cirrhosis in 1983 aged just 49.¹

In Britain, the personal lives of footballers were relatively low profile until the 1960s, though well before that there were known casualties of alcohol – for example, the talented forward Hughie Gallacher, of Newcastle United and Scotland, suffered depression following the untimely death of his wife, drank heavily and in 1957, aged 54, committed suicide by jumping under an express train. With the abolition of the maximum wage in 1961, however, a new era of

prosperity ensued, at once, raising players' public profile. With hindsight it was still a more innocent era – for example, the late, great Bobby Moore and his West Ham and England team-mate Martin Peters starred, with their wives, in a TV advertisement urging the public to visit their local pub, something that would be deemed inappropriate today.

As the reporting of football in the media intensified, so the personal problems of footballers attracted more attention. This has not necessarily been a negative development, for many players' stories have raised awareness of alcohol problems and stimulated discussion. Jimmy Greaves, always fond of a drink during his playing peak, descended into full-blown alcoholism in retirement.² In 1979 he publicly admitted his problem in a harrowing TV documentary, in which he recounted his slide; this was hailed as a landmark in health education, urging others thus afflicted to seek help. Whilst Greaves was successfully treated and forged a second career, ironically in the media, many former colleagues had less happy outcomes. Jim Baxter, a former star of Glasgow Rangers, developed alcoholic cirrhosis and underwent two liver transplants, leading to a passionate ethical debate in Scotland despite the affection in which he was held in his homeland.³ He died from pancreatic cancer in 2001, aged 61. George Best, one of the finest players of all time, had a well-documented addiction to alcohol leading to cirrhosis. Despite a liver transplant, his continued drinking led to his death in 2005, aged just 59.⁴

In the 1970s much admiration was lavished on a select group of players with similar characteristics – talented, rebellious mavericks with bohemian lifestyles outside social norms. Unsurprisingly, London-based players, players such as Stan Bowles (QPR) and Peter Osgood (Chelsea) were prominent in this cohort for whom drinking was a daily routine. The health problems duly ensued; Bowles required inpatient treatment for alcohol addiction a few times shortly after retirement, while Osgood died suddenly from a heart attack in 2006 aged 59.⁵

The 1980s saw the advent of club sponsorship and shirt advertising, and not surprisingly the drinks industry featured prominently, for example Holsten's sponsorship of Tottenham Hotspur. The curious paradox was that during a decade marred by terrible hooliganism by fans – itself invariably fuelled by alcohol – the conduct of players rarely raised concern. Equally interesting is that brewery-sponsored clubs attracted no censure for this. In contrast, clubs sponsored by Japanese electronics firms such as Arsenal (JVC) and Liverpool (Hitachi) were criticised as insensitive, at a time of high unemployment blamed in part on Japanese and other Far Eastern competition.

The 1990s would see the top tier of English club football enjoy unprecedented wealth, thanks to the formation of the Premier League and in particular its

relationship with Sky TV. In tandem with this attitudes to physical conditioning and lifestyle became more professional, though errant behaviour did not cease. Meanwhile a sustained, albeit unevenly distributed, economic boom created a hedonistic atmosphere in sectors that were the beneficiaries. Cocaine, though illegal, became widely used in showbusiness circles, particularly by fashion models amongst whom its use is an open secret.⁶ Elite footballers, particularly in London, formed part of this world, and cocaine joined alcohol on the temptation menu. The successful Arsenal team of the late 1980s and 1990s had two players whose addiction problems were highly publicised. Tony Adams, a magnificent club servant for 19 years, admitted his alcoholism in 1996, and underwent rehabilitation.⁷ His profile helped maintain public awareness in a similar way Greaves managed some years earlier, and in 2000 he founded the Sporting Chance clinic, a charitable foundation helping sportsmen and women with addiction. Paul Merson's problems came to light even earlier, in 1994, and although he seemed to conquer his alcoholism, gambling has led to more personal problems resurfacing.

When the media analyse such cases, a predictable theme ensues: young working-class men, even when hugely financially rewarded, inevitably gravitate to the crude and unsophisticated behaviour of 'chav' culture. A parallel theme is that the situation is more pronounced in the UK, and that Continental cultures are innately more sophisticated. This is a simplistic explanation that does not always stand up to scrutiny when tested. When the Swede Sven-Göran Eriksson was appointed coach of the England national team in 2001, it was widely hoped that this would usher in a new era of technical expertise and social decorum. Bespectacled and scholarly-looking, his appearance belied an extremely colourful personal life and appetite for celebrity which took indulgence to new heights. This referred less to players' drinking – this generation was more temperate than its predecessors – but rather the accompanying wives and girlfriends (so-called WAGs). A feature of three major tournaments was this group's ostentatious shopping during the day and loud, drink-fuelled partying at night – WAG might as well stand for Whisky and Gin. The tawdry spectacle helped sell millions of newspapers, before being ended by relatively early exits from major tournaments.

Having started this story with an Italian, perhaps it is appropriate that it should end with another. Fabio Capello is currently the head coach of the England team, which begs the obvious question – will the status quo change? Attitudinally conservative, he was never likely to tolerate the excesses of the Eriksson regime.⁸ Nevertheless, the player lobby, and human nature will limit what he can change in the sport more widely. Though derided as a poor example for young men and women, football remains the world's most popular

sport despite, and perhaps *because* its faults are those to which so many of us can relate. Furthermore, we as doctors can also exploit this, for drug and alcohol problems are not rare, and football's high profile and universal popularity amongst both sexes provides many examples we may reasonably cite of lives taking a wrong turn.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

None required

GUARANTOR

Edin Lakasing

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Edin Lakasing
 Chorleywood Health Centre
 Chorleywood
 UK
 Email: edin.lakasing@chorleywood.healthcentre.nhs.uk

BIOGRAPHIES

Edin Lakasing is a GP, in Chorleywood, Hertfordshire, a trainer on the Watford Vocational Training Scheme, and undergraduate tutor to University College Hospital and Imperial College, London. He is also a medical writer, and prone to fret over the next Tottenham Hotspur result.

Zul A Mirza is Consultant in Accident and Emergency at West Middlesex University Hospital, London. He has published several papers on drug and alcohol misuse, and has been waiting patiently (since the year he qualified, in fact) to see Liverpool Football Club crowned champions again.