

FIRST TOUCH

Q1 OF 2020 ISSUE



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EDITOR'S " "

NOTE

I wish we could be sharing our first newsletter of the second quarter at a better time. The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed precious lives, hospitalised many and temporarily changed lifestyles of people all over the world by forcing the halt of sporting events, meetings, schools as well as any other large gatherings of people.

While we all have been doing our part in this unified fight against the virus by observing social distance, practising good hygiene and #stayingathome; we do it with an earnest hope that we will soon reclaim our streets, offices, stadiums, places of worship, and all areas of communal gathering. History teaches us that nothing can ever take that away from us.

As we prepare to share our global soccer highlights from the first quarter of 2020, a special shout out to all the first responders around the world, who have been risking their lives to save humanity. Governments, we thank you. Other public, private institutions and individuals, you're the real MVPs. To all of us, our efforts are not small either. We continue flattening the curve, and checking any possible spread, VAR style!

Cheers,

Topher Hegngi, Chief Editor



2020 FT COMBINE REPORT



We are happy to report that one of our biggest events of the year was again successfully executed. In January, the second annual FirstTouch College ID Combine welcomed local area talent that are making the youth soccer landscape what it is today, in the Washington DC area.

From parents and organisations that are sacrificially fuelling the vision, to College coaches that direct the course and athletes that captain the whole thing, we had them all. Soccer coaches from over 20 colleges took time out of their demanding schedules to recruit the talent that the D.C area is well known for. Players from 18 different high schools were represented and seized the opportunity to showcase their talent.

Sampled here are some of the visuals from the event, more could be watched in the videos hyperlinked *here*. Our hope is that the second annual FT College ID Combine that continued the strong interest from last year, will continue to grow to become a reliable pipeline for athletes to fulfil their dreams and use as a resource and for colleges to find their next talent.

Thank you all for making it a success.

FirstTouch Team

IS FIFA'S PLANNED \$1 BILLION INVESTMENT ENOUGH FOR WOMEN'S SOCCER?

Written By Lovejoy Tabeth Munamati

Soccer, just like most sports has been a “male domain” for a long time. Over the years women have been working to make their mark in the sport and we have noted a remarkable rise in the recognition of women soccer. Women from all walks of life view the game as a tool for cutting across all boundaries in terms of society, race, religion, ethnicity and socio-economic circumstances.

The introduction of the pinnacle of women soccer, FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991 and subsequently the FIFA U-20 and U-17 Women's World Cup in 2002 and 2008 respectively was a major milestone. Investments at the grassroots level increased. The FIFA Forward program has made the genesis of new leagues and competitions possible with increased funding. The level of play has dramatically improved, media attention has increased exponentially, and the game has grown in popularity. However, there is no denying the fact that soccer is still a male-dominated sport. The question now becomes how do we make women soccer just as big?



Why women soccer is still not as big as the men's

One of the reasons why women soccer always seems less exciting lies in the media itself. Quality media coverage plays a major role in the prominence of a sport. While the common perception is that if women soccer was worthy of more coverage they would have it, what is apparent is the fact that the popularity of the game comes from the media itself. Men's soccer is definitely going to seem more exciting since they have higher production values, higher-quality coverage, and higher-quality commentary. In contrast, there are fewer camera angles, fewer cuts to shot, fewer instant replays when we watch women's soccer, so hell yeah, it's going to seem to be a slower and less exciting game.

Perhaps we do look at soccer as a feminist issue, but that is because it is. Some argue that women soccer is less prominent than men's soccer because of the gap in physical strength and athleticism lying between genders. However how sure are we that it is a good enough reason to push men's soccer into prominence over their female counterparts? Is it not just us being a chauvinistic society? I am sure a lot will agree with me that one of the best soccer games that they have ever watched regardless of gender was the Canada vs USA Olympic match in 2012. Canada's Christine Sinclair put her team on her back and almost carried them into the gold medal match, only to be thwarted by questionable officiating. Sinclair displayed great athleticism that some of her male counterparts have never been able to display. That game represented the beauty of athletic competition.

However, if female fans cannot consistently support women soccer in order for the teams to remain solvent, why should men suffer a gender inequality stroke? Women themselves tend to be enemies of the game for not rendering enough support to their kind, the way males do.

Lack of proper support and funding resulting in lower salary rates and revenue obviously makes the women's game less appealing to young girls and less lucrative to investors.



The much needed intervention

Over the years, women have treated soccer as more than just a game, playing with passion (whether it's in the stadium or on village fields, with world-class gear or hand me downs). This drive to take the game to the next level has also been noted. This hasn't gone unnoticed as various sponsors began to see women's soccer clubs as lucrative investments. Consequently, media coverage increased and so did the fan base. However, the competitive and commercial success women soccer has attained over the years stands in stark contrast to the underlying challenges that face the game and its leaders when it comes to development from the grassroots – which represents the future of the game away from the spotlight..

FIFA has done a great job investing in women's soccer through various programs such as the FIFA Forward program that has made funding at the grassroots level possible. Resultantly, new leagues and competitions have been created awarding a lot of women the chance to play the game on a higher level.

Apart from financial investments, FIFA's Women's Football Strategy also outlines how the governing body plans to work with confederations, member associations, clubs and players, the media, fans and other stakeholders to confront and surmount the challenges faced in the game.

FIFA's recent contribution has made huge waves, at the FIFA Football Conference in Milan in September 2019, soccer's supreme promised to invest \$1 billion in the women's game over the next four years. (2019 to 2022). "We need to be a little bit brave and a little bit bold if we want to move women's football onto the next level – we need to stop copying what we do in the men's game," said Infantino (FIFA president).

Aside from the billion-dollar funding, Infantino plans to launch a Women's Club World Cup within the next two years (2020 and 2021) and revive his idea for a Women's World League, mimicking a Nations League on a global scale. In addition to the above, during the June annual congress of the world federation, Infantino earmarked \$500 million for the women's game in the 2019-2022 cycle. This was in response to criticism over the minimal prize money on offer at the Women's World Cup in France. After the success of the competition, that plan was quickly revised. The tournament's expansion to a 32-team format for the 2023 iteration got fast-tracked so as to exploit the game's new success.

There is no denying that FIFA is indeed doing a great job in supporting the women's game. However, the two burning questions are: "who benefits from this funding?" and "is it enough"?

Who benefits from the billion-dollar deal?

Details on how the \$1 billion will be funded, distributed and audited to ensure that it reaches women and girls at the grassroots and truly grows the game, remain vague. However, it is apparent that much development will be considered at the top of the pyramid, further elevating leagues that are already established and have guaranteed lucrative charts. This will indeed increase the popularity of women soccer and guarantee better salaries and benefits for players who already belong to certain leagues. This is an awesome deal, but what happens to the rest of the girls playing soccer in village fields, with great passion but zero opportunities?

"A change made to the top layer of the pyramid will always be short-lived until a change is made to the base."

— Lovejoy Munamati

Is the billion-dollar funding enough?

Increasing funds in women soccer will undeniably lift the game's influence to an unimaginable level. FIFA's billion dollars will go a long way in further improving the game's influence. However, is money the ultimate solution? Will it solve the various problems that lead to the women's game being less influential than their counterparts? Will it really bring the change we are looking for?

Well the simple answer to all these questions is NO. Of course we need funding to move forward and to ultimately change the game. However, to help everyone involved, be it an established player or a simple girl with nothing but passion and dreams of brighter days playing somewhere in a village we will need more than just funds.

The long-standing lack of women in positions of responsibility in the football community has led to limited voices to advocate for change. Years of institutional neglect and a lack of investment have prevented girls and women from playing the game and from assuming roles in technical, administrative and governance functions. Honestly only a woman can understand the pains and needs of another, a man in power can try to but never pinpoint the actual problem women are facing. In 2016, the FIFA Congress made the first steps to rectify this problem by approving some landmark decisions for women's football and the representation of women in football. Realizing that funds alone will not solve this issue, FIFA football strategy has put a plan forward to include women in administrative roles and correct historical errors.

As much as we want funds to keep pouring in, the truth is funds don't just pour into washed-out associations. To receive the maximum amount of funding, federations must meet certain criteria including investment in women's soccer, according to FIFA's Forward 2.0 program.



These criteria include:

- a) Organizing a regular, nation-wide women's competition that lasts over a period of six months, involving at least ten teams, and playing at least 90 matches
- b) Having an active women's national team that plays at least four official or friendly matches in one calendar year
- c) Having active girls' national teams in at least two age categories who play at least four games per calendar year.

However not every association can manage to meet the above conditions as roughly a quarter of FIFA member associations simply don't field senior women's teams. A good example is Pakistan's women's national team which last played a game in 2014, the year the national league became defunct. Pakistan is not a loner, after participating in the 2015 Women's World Cup, Colombia barely played competitive soccer. So in essence funding alone is a good solution for well-established associations that can easily sustain their influence, of which many teams struggle to do that.

“Over the years, women have treated soccer as more than just a game, playing with passion (whether it's in the stadium or on village fields, with world-class gear or hand me downs). This drive to take the game to the next level has also been noted. This hasn't gone unnoticed as various sponsors began to see women's soccer clubs as lucrative investments.”

— Lovejoy Munamati



FIFA can do much more

Apart from providing funds FIFA can do so much more for women's soccer. The FIFA women's football strategy has outlined its objectives as part of the FIFA forward 2.0. The objectives illustrate support that goes beyond funding and includes:

Growing participation

Increasing the level of female participation in football is central to the organization's ability to reach the goals and objectives outlined in FIFA 2.0: The Vision for the Future. This will allow FIFA to reach both communities where soccer is not well established and those where women grace the pitch every day. The non-profit organization will work diligently to ensure that more women have increased access to football in regions all over the world while supporting its member associations in achieving their own women's football objectives.

Enhance the commercial value

FIFA's effectiveness to commercialize its competitions and events determines its ability to develop the game. With tremendous opportunity to expand its development efforts by creating new revenue streams from its women's competitions and events, the organization will optimize existing competitions in order to maximize their quality.

Build the foundations

Building upon the current foundations to effectively govern and regulate a more sophisticated women's football ecosystem is one of FIFA Forward 2.0's goals. The organization will further develop leadership training platforms designed to attract women to the upper ranks of the football industry. With the knowledge that increasing female participation in football will play a major role in realizing the organization's larger goals of growing the game, FIFA is pretty keen on women's soccer development.

The goals of the FIFA Forward 2.0 for women's soccer are to be achieved using a 5-pronged strategy. The strategy involves developing and growing the game, showcasing, communication and commercialization, governing and leading, education and empowerment.

With all the above interventions along with the billion-dollar investment, women's soccer should be good to go. However infrastructural development is another issue to contend with. Infrastructure development at both club and national team level is one sector FIFA can venture into. With state of the art infrastructure comes great passion, skills in the game. Hence FIFA's 1-billion-dollar investment might still not be enough to ultimately develop women's soccer. However, the investment will go a long way in changing women's soccer as we know it. As FIFA's president, Infantino stated while speaking about the investment:

“There will be a before, and an after, the Women's World Cup 2019, in terms of women's football,”

WHO ARE THE FAVORITES TO WIN THE 2019-20 ABSA PREMIERSHIP TITLE?

Written By Feyisayo Stephens



Mamelodi Sundowns were crowned champions of South Africa for the second consecutive year after seeing off Orlando Pirates at the top of the summit by just two points. But the main question on everyone's mind as the 2019/20 campaign kicked off was can they make it three titles in a row, and take home the crown for the 10th time, editing the history books in the process.

Pitso Mosimane's men dramatically retained their championship after fending off fierce competition from Orlando Pirates and Bidvest Wits who were only 6 points adrift from being named champions.

There was a lot of excitement prior to the beginning of the 2019/20 season and it has provided nothing short of that. The title race was expected to be a two-horse race between Sundowns and Orlando Pirates, but halfway through the season that thought seems like a distant memory as several teams have come up to break Bafana BaStyle and the Buccaneers' dominance at the top for the past two years. But who can really be considered as favorites at this point in the season?

Kaizer Chiefs

Amakhosi were definitely not considered to be in the race for the title at the beginning of the season following their truly devastating 9th place finish in the 2018/19 season. However, a change of fortunes have seen them move nine points clear of second-placed Orlando Pirates having played one game less. Doubts, disappointments and a whole lot more filled the Arrowhead Stadium as the 2019/20 campaign kicked off. Fans were not entirely convinced that Ernst Middendorp was the right man to lead them to their first title since the 2014/15 campaign.

An unprosperous transfer window that saw only five new signings and about ten departures during the summer did not improve the atmosphere around the club either. Now, 19 games into the new season, that all seems like an extinct memory as Chiefs look like a title-winning side again. Amakhosi currently hold the best wins record in the league (74%) averaging 2.37 points per game but more importantly, their away record is currently the best in the Absa Premiership. Why is this important? That is the one thing all teams which have been crowned champions have in common, they always had an incredible away record and if Chiefs are able to maintain their great away form they might be on their way to the title.

Mamelodi Sundowns

It would be impossible to have this conversation without including Pitso Mosimane's men. The Brazilians are on the verge of rewriting the history books with the 10th title in sight. This record will definitely be a motivating factor as the Brazilians are trying to make it three in three. Sundowns have taken 35 points from their first 18 games this campaign, managing a 54% win rate. This has left them ten-point adrift from the top of the summit. Pitso has openly considered Chiefs to be favorites after their 4-2 defeat at the hands of the former. The CAF Champions League played a huge role in that defeat and the title race at large, but is that really enough reason for the huge gap at the top of the table? Sundowns definitely have their work cut out for them if they wish to make it a hat-trick of titles, but if any team can recover from a 10-point deficit it would definitely be Sundowns. Their team boasts one of the best coaches to ever grace African football and a very talented squad. Besides they pulled that one on Pirates last season, that is coming from behind to win the title.

Bidvest Wits

Having pushed Orlando Pirates and Sundowns all the way last campaign, the 2016/17 champions would like to have the crown once again, and with an experienced and well-decorated coach in the person of Gavin Hunt adding talents such as the Bafana Bafana trio of Thulani Hlatshwayo, Buhle Mkhwanazi and Sifiso Hlanti in their side, makes their hunt for the title achievable. The Clever Boys are currently down in fifth place, 15 points from the title leaders Kaizer Chiefs but they have 5 games in hand. Only Kaizer Chiefs have a better win rate than Wits. Their defence which consists of the South African trio, has helped Wits to maintain the best defence in the league conceding only 12 goals and are just 3 goals away for matching Sundowns scoring form this season and still with a massive number of games in hand to do all of that. Gavin might have verbally thrown in the towel when he said, "Give the league title to Kaizer chiefs already," earlier in December, but we all know very well that the title race is not over until it's over.

Who's your pick? Which side will go all the way? Let us know in the comments below

WHO WERE MLS' MOST VALUABLE TEAMS IN 2019 AND WHY?

Written By Lovejoy Tabeth Munamati

American football is the definition of sports in the USA, baseball is the national pastime and basketball lands itself a place as the nation's third most popular professional sport. Now, this absolutely leaves our dear old soccer in a difficult position when it comes to finding its place in the American psyche. However, soccer is not the world's number one for nothing, the legendary sport is slowly creeping into the hearts of the American audience and it just might have finally found its place in the world's largest economy.

History of soccer in America

The world's game graced American soils from as early as the late 1800s. However, the first professional league of note was formed in 1921 and was referred to as the American Soccer League (ASL). The league thrived for about a decade, attracting European talent and scooping third place at the 1930 World Cup. However, as of 1931, in-house fights between the league and its member teams led to the ASL's collapse and soccer in America fell off the map for 4 decades.

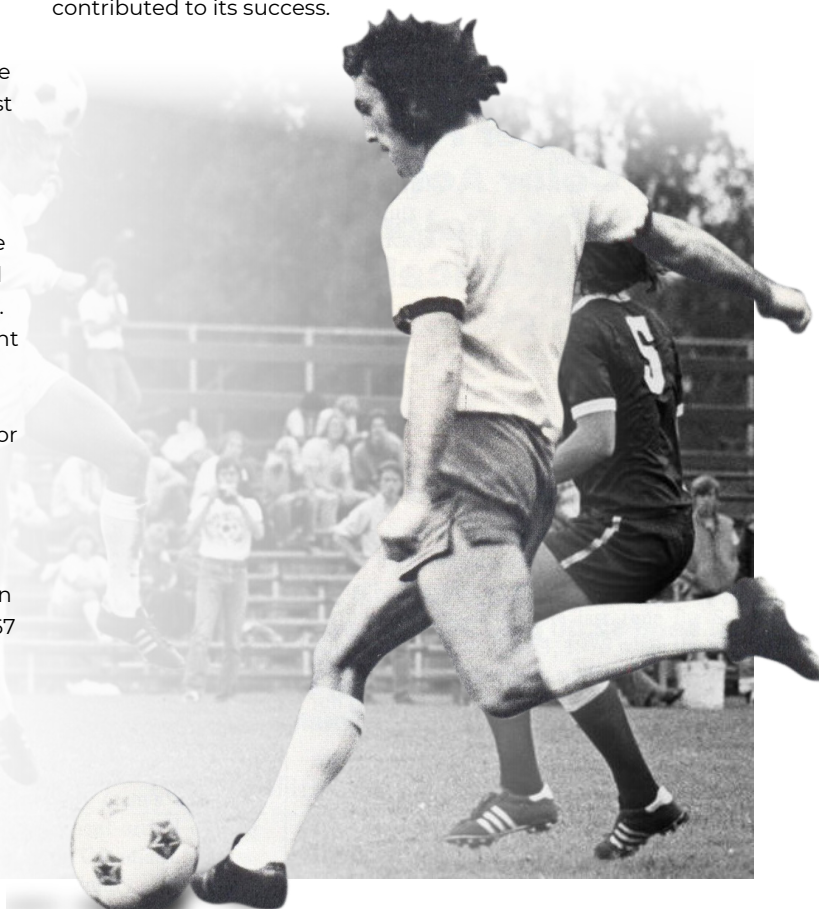
The USA did manage to gain a memorable victory over England at the 1950 World Cup in Brazil. However, soccer was still less prominent compared to the days of the ASL until the 1960s when the National Professional Soccer League (NPSL) was formed (1967 to be exact). Sadly, the NPSL only managed to last one season.

When NPSL went up in flames, its ashes gave birth to North American Soccer League (NASL). The NASL managed to change the way people viewed soccer in the USA especially when the great Pele` joined New York Cosmos after his retirement. When the Cosmos signed Pele` who is arguably the greatest player in the history of the game, soccer was catapulted into the mainstream in the USA. Every fan wanted to touch Pele` and shake his hand and Cosmos drew large crowds to stadiums to watch their games. However, Pele` retired from the NASL in 1977 and took the league down with him, fans started to lose interest in the league and by 1984 the NASL had hit the ground.

It took 10 years to get soccer back to the scene in the USA. FIFA decided to host the 1994 World Cup in the USA and interest in the sport was awoken but most Americans were still a bit skeptical. However, efforts to convince Americans too fully like soccer continued to be made and this led to the formation of the famous Major League Soccer, simply known as MLS. Unlike the previous leagues, MLS has endured and managed to change the way soccer is viewed in the USA. MLS has led to a couple of national successes.

In 1999, the USA managed to win the Women's World Cup and in 2002 the men's team progressed to the quarter-finals in Brazil. Apart from those two, in 2010 the USA team made it through to the knockout stages when Landon Donovan scored a goal in the group match against Algeria.

Finally, with MLS in the picture, the FIFA World Cup began to make sense to Americans. MLS has continued to make soccer a big part of the social and economic circles of America as a whole and the various teams that are part of the league have contributed to its success.



MLS's most valuable teams 2019

Ranking MLS's most valuable teams for 2019 can be summarized into a list of the top 9 according to revenue generated and value in dollars as below:

RANK	TEAM	VALUE (\$M)	REVENUE(\$M)
1	Atlanta United	500	78
2	LA Galaxy	480	64
3	LA FC	475	75
4	Seattle Sounders	405	47
5	Toronto FC	395	43
6	Portland Timbers	390	47
7	New York City FC	385	45
8	Chicago Fire	335	23
9	DC United	330	41

Atlanta United

Atlanta United found itself in pole position for the second time in a row. The team was worth \$500 million at the end of 2019. They also generated \$78 million worth of revenue. Apart from financial value, Atlanta United has notable on-field success which include winning the 2018 MLS Cup and making the playoffs in each of its three MLS seasons. This on-field success has increased the team's fan base and their average home-game attendance of 52,000 fans per game ranks among the top soccer teams in the world. Atlanta United is also a leader in attracting cash flow from Europe's top leagues, the most notable example being the sale of star midfielder Miguel Almiron to Premier League's Newcastle United for \$27 million, a transfer fee that no other team has ever received before.



Chicago Fire at \$400 million valuation, a huge amount that is worth a value of more than 4 NHL teams.

The average MLS team is now worth \$313 million, which is up to 30% from last year's value. The year over year growth in MLS teams far outpaces the rising team values in NBA (13%), the NFL (11%), MLB (8%) and the NHL (6%). MLS' average attendance of 21,358 from 2013-2018 has been ranked number 8 in the world. In addition, Atlanta United, the MLS team which only joined MLS in 2017 has the tenth best average attendance of 51,547.

How soccer growth in the USA is impacting business decisions

Professional soccer at all levels is thriving in the USA with increased average attendance and media coverage and this is, in turn, attracting many markets to support MLS. Many businessmen are turning to MLS as a lucrative goldmine and are pouring in investments into the league. Most MLS teams are running at a loss but investors continue to pour in because they believe the future of USA soccer is getting brighter by the day.

"Expansion during the last 15 years has been enormously successful and the key driver behind the league's continued rise, and we are pleased that some of the top business and community leaders representing great markets in North America are aggressively pursuing MLS expansion clubs," said MLS commissioner Don Garber.

LA Galaxy

The team fell second to Atlanta with a value of \$480 million. Galaxy has been MLS's model of success since the league's genesis in 1994, generating \$5.5 million from local media rights. It's the famous MLS team that never ranks outside the top 6 in average home game attendance. Among all the MLS teams, Galaxy has been the most preferred landing for international stars from the likes of David Beckham to Zlatan Ibrahimović.



The question on people's minds could be "is soccer powerful enough to create employment opportunities and restore the economy in the presence of NBA, NFL, and MLB?"

The answer to the above question is that it is indeed possible for soccer to be part of the driving force for a successful economy in the USA if serious reforms and investments are pushed towards the sport. This will guarantee the future growth of soccer in the USA to come close to the European level.

LAFC

Galaxy's rivals have completed only 2 seasons but already finds itself in Forbes' top 3 and is valued at \$475 million. LAFC is reportedly worth annual payments of \$6.7 million of naming rights and \$6 million of jersey sponsorship. The team has sold out every one of its home games despite having the highest ticket prices in MLS history and ranks eighth in home-game attendance. Both LAFC and Galaxy drew an audience of nearly 900,000 viewers when they faced off in the 2019 semi-final playoffs.



Huge investments are already being pulled into the Major League soccer for expansion teams. Joe Mansueto's purchase of Chicago Fire is a good example of a major investment by notable businessmen and billionaires. Regardless of the MLS team ranking eighth in the list of MLS's most valuable teams, Mansueto purchased the team at a \$400 million valuation. In July 2019, NBA star James Harden invested \$15 million for a small stake in the Houston Dynamo. In August, Microsoft executive Terry Myerson led an ownership group that includes celebrities Ciara, Macklemore and Russell Wilson in buying a stake in Seattle Sounders. Another notable purchase was that of 9% of Orlando Sports Holding by Hedge fund manager Albert Friedberg.

Seattle Sounders

The league's fourth most valuable team and the current MLS Cup champions are worth \$405 million and comes second after Atlanta United in average home game attendance.



In conclusion MLS and soccer in the USA, in general, is finally finding its place in the social and economic circles of Americans punctuated by increasing numbers of fans and investor. Soccer might just be the new goldmine for businessmen in the USA.

Chicago Fire

Forbes values the team at \$335 million ranking it at number 8 in the list of MLS's most valuable teams. The team has struggled to find its footing in terms of relevance and financial status for a long time, constantly being ranked in the bottom 5 in home game attendance since 2013. However, investors are looking for a possible bright future for MLS teams and USA soccer as a whole by investing large sums of money. A good example of that investment is the purchase of Chicago Fire by billionaire Joe Mansueto. In September, the Morningstar Founder Joe Mansueto acquired 100% ownership of



HOW DID ARSENAL FALL SO FAR AND WHAT CAN THEY DO TO REBUILD?

Written By Dennis Takaendes

8-2

Chew gum, check. Glasses, check. Dark and heavy coat keeping the cold on lock and hiding the prestigious red tie, check! You know the rest. With Fergie on the touchline, his red troopers were fashionably running riot. They were subduing the other red, making a show of what used to be a formidable opponent. Nani, Rooney, Ashley Young, and even the soon to become a Gooner in Danny Welbeck had all gotten in on the act, embarrassing his future employers. I bet it felt like a Germany blitzkrieg for the visitors as Manchester United finished 8-2 winners on the day. That is 59 years after Arsenal had done the same to the Red Devils.

It all just started as another Premier League weekend, in need of a scoreline and 3 points up for grabs but the 8-2 loss to Manchester United wasn't just a stain on a season record; but a scar forever etched in the hearts of the entire Arsenal community, both present, and future. It still remains until this very day.

But that's not where it all started, all hell had broken loose a little earlier than that.

49-0

It actually didn't start here either, but why not revisit some of the greatest footballing stories ever written. Before they were "the Inevitables", Arsene Wenger's Arsenal were once upon a time, "the Invincibles." During the 2003/04 Premier League season, the Gunners finished an entire 38-games season unbeaten to clinch the coveted English title, even extending that record to 49 games until, as luck would have it, Manchester United ended that run in 2004. It was the perfect story, a young foreign manager in Arsene had been unpopularly handed the reins in 1996 at one of the most prestigious clubs in the country.

Ring in some changes around the whole managerial landscape that included diet, he took his time to really come through but eventually assembled an incredible force that literally no one could stop. Thierry Henry, Dennis Bergkamp, Lauren, Robert Pires, Freddie Ljungberg only to mention but a few were just a few of his headliners in an all-star line-up that tore up defences for fun. In a space of 9 years, the Frenchman amassed a total of 7 titles. Rain typically follows a drought, but not quite in the Arsenal world, they had it backwards. Here is where things started going south.

The cost of ambition

A dream that does not cost you, is seldom worth pursuing. Even that bit is also true for Arsenal. As more trophies clang in and ticket sales made the till ring, Arsenal's famous hunting ground became smaller. The leadership, board, players and even fans perhaps felt it too. They were now envisioning the conquest of Europe and more world-wide influence. Replacing Highbury with



a shiner and bigger Emirates seemed the right accessory to the vision. It was obviously going to cost money, but that was not all.

a. The great exodus

Without going so much into the construction project itself, the bottom line is that it demanded so much that Arsene Wenger's player grooming skills came in handy. As the former Gunners manager once recalled, they had to sell their best players to make it work.

"People do not take a step back to look at what has happened."

"For me, the environment changed between 2006 and 2015, because we were under financial restrictions (the construction of the Emirates), at a time when a lot of money was injected into English football."

"We had less money, we had to sell our best players, whilst other teams were strengthening... sometimes with our players. But the expectations were exactly the same."

"To be completely honest, I have never worked more than during this period, between 2006 and 2015. I had signed a five-year contract because the banks required it whilst we were building a new stadium."

"We had absolutely no guarantees and I went to the end of my contract because I wanted to respect this challenge. But it was difficult. I am proud of what I have done."

– Arsene Wenger

It would have been easier if it was a typical business transaction of exchanging money for a product or service. Core players left the club for other pastures, not just any pastures but that of their bitter rivals. It was subtracting themselves and adding to a foe, or

even better, selling their soul.

During this period, legendary club captains such as Thierry Henry and Robin van Persie left for Barcelona and Manchester United. The young boy who had grown to become a man and a legend at the club in Cesc Fabregas also followed Henry to the Spanish giants. In a dagger to the heart move, Togolese international in Emmanuel Adebayor switched allegiances to cross-town rivals Tottenham and even came back once to humiliate them by the most savage goal celebration of the decade. All of Samir Nasri, Gael Clichy and Bakary Sagna joined the blue-half of Manchester. Time will not permit us to mention the likes of Alexis Sanchez, Aaron Ramsey and Alex Oxlade Chamberlain who departed the club for almost nothing to already strong rivals, amongst many others.

Some of these players' contracts were left to run out and the sanctioning of their sales to rivals did little in showing the club hierarchy understood and respected the culture of the club.

b. Lots of misses and few hits

To make matters worse, even when the Emirates Stadium was finally furnished, the club made some questionable acquisitions of new players. Ones which never really popped but became mere shadows of legends who had left. We are talking of the likes of Olivier Giroud who eventually reached a century of goals for the club, but his shortcomings made fans miss captain van Persie even more. Yaya Sanogo, Takuma Asano, Kim Kallstrom, Mohamed Elneny, Emmanuel Frimpong, Nicklas Bendtner, Lucas Perez are some of the names either bought in or came through the academy that never really made an impact but rather became scapegoats and constant reminders of the despicable state of the club. One of the brighter lights of that generation became Santi Cazorla, the little magician who danced through opponents and dazzled fans, not forgetting Hector Bellerin who stormed out of Hale End Academy into the first team. The latter remains an integral part of the fabric of the club to this day.

c. The ugly sisters

As the Gunners were trying to sort out their bedroom issues from around 2006-15, their rivals in the Premier League were not folding their hands. Chelsea through billionaire Roman Abramovich had begun reaching deeper into their pockets, bringing world-class managers such as Jose Mourinho, Carlo Ancelotti and Rafa Benitez to the club. They were also signing world-class players such as Fernando Torres and Drogba for hefty fees, all resulting in trophies. The law of replacement was in effect. The same applied for Manchester United who were still stable under Sir Alex Fergusson at least until 2013, Manchester City, Tottenham, and Liverpool who emerged as some of the big winners of the decade.

Just to put things into perspective, the mighty Gunners who had registered at least a 4th place finish and secured Champions League football for 19 consecutive seasons between 1998/99 to 2016/17, finished the decade having not achieved the same feat in the last 2 seasons of the 2010s.

d. The fighting parents

Perhaps the sticking point to all their struggles could be argued as the lack of a steady vision from the club hierarchy which failed to steer the club off mediocrity. Some of the images that come to mind remind us of the non-alignment of two majority shareholders in Stan Kroenke and Alisher Usmanov. The latter was believed to be more ambitious and endowed with loose pockets. Usmanov wanted to buy out Kroenke but eventually sold his stock to the former after several attempts, further charging the environment surrounding the Emirates.



e. Glass half-full or half-empty

By the book, most of Arsenal's troubles were supposed to disappear after the construction of the shiny stadium that costed much more than money. Well, not quite. As Arsene Wenger once lamented in one of his reflections after leaving the club, "they had built a new stadium but left their soul at the old one."

Performances oscillated over the years as the Frenchman tried to initiate a major rebuilt. During that period from the late 2000s, going into the 2010s, Arsenal endured a drought of 9 years without major silverware. That brand new shiny stadium almost seemed like an imposing figure of a curse until when they won the English FA Cup in the 2013/14 season, and then two more times after that.

A new genesis

As things charged up around the Emirates, an explosion was obviously inevitable. Stagnation became the general feeling amongst most of the Arsenal faithful. The fans had grown fairly used to more prestigious titles and codenames such as "the Invincibles," chasing top 4 finishes and cowing under the whip of the likes of Bayern Munich, Manchester City, Chelsea and Manchester United with humungous scorelines such as 5-1, 6-2, 6-1 and 8-2 could not just cut it. The big dog had shelved off a few titles and pounds of pride to become the underdog. Change was inevitable.

With 21-years of service under his belt and having overseen it all, to many, the leadership of Arsene Wenger and Chief Executive Ivan Gazidis had become the symbol of failure. The two eventually left the club after initiating some changes that would form the bedrock of a hopeful future.



22-0

After going through a series of candidates with a commanding fear of repeating Manchester United's failures in replacing a long-serving manager swirling their minds, Gazidis and the Arsenal board eventually settled on Unai Emery after months of phone calls and interviews. It was actually hard to argue with the decision given the limited resources Arsenal had, to bring in more famous names. The Spaniard had worked water into wine stuff at Valencia, seeing the La Liga club through some of its darkest periods and bankruptcy. He had also won the UEFA Europa League three-consecutive times with Sevilla and earned himself a ticket into the cash-laden French Ligue 1's Paris St Germain.

Emery preached change, intensity, and restoration of the club's bond with its fans. All the right things. He even became a fan favorite in his early days for tactical tweaks that saw the Gunners go through a 22 match unbeaten run. In particular, the traveling fans chanted, "we've got our Arsenal back," in their all entertaining 5-1 win at Fulham in October 2018.

However, in a late twist of fortunes, Emery's Red Army capitulated towards the end of the 2018/19 season. They secured just 4 points out of a possible 15 in their last 5 games and lost an elusive top 4 spot that was literally theirs to lose. Not only that, but they also forfeited a return to Europe's elite club competition by fashionably capitulating in the UEFA Europa League final to lose 4-1 to Chelsea. A debut season under new management with so much promise became a typical Arsenal season in a flash.

Going into the new season, they never recovered. Poorer results eventually led to the dismissal of the Spaniard just one and a half years after his appointment. It was time to go back to the drawing board.

Positive signings

Putting aside the Emery appointment that didn't quite work out, there are a lot of positives that fans took and can take from his spell in charge. Firstly, the new management structure which now included a Head of Recruitment, Head of Football, Head Coach, Club Lawyer, and the Chief Executive has already done

major surgeries that could reap huge benefits in the future. In past times, it was typically Arsene Wenger and Ivan Gazidis who ran everything, the club manager and Chief Executive.

Unlike the periods of the likes of the aforementioned Sanogo, Asano and Lucas Perez; Arsenal's new hierarchy has already brought in gems of footballing talent in the likes of Matteo Guendouzi and Gabriel Martinelli. Even the Hale End Academy seems rejuvenated with talented youth players such as Bukayo Saka, Eddie Nketiah, Joe Willock, Emile Smith Rowe and Reiss Nelson knocking on the door of a starting berth. Most impressively and rare to the Arsenal that everybody had grown used to, they arm strangled the likes of Manchester United, Liverpool, Napoli and Chelsea to bring in record transfers of Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Nicolas Pepe. The former is already the new captain of the club and one of the most prolific strikers in the division.

Potential, something that was arguably present in the Gunners former times of stadium construction and the exodus of players, is very much palpable right now. It also seems like they've found the right person to organize the squad and craft a new pathway.

Mikel Arteta, the "reincarnation" of Arsene the managerial prodigy

Just like the appointment of Wenger back in 1996, Mikel Arteta's return to the club as the Head Coach drew several skeptics but is slowly starting to feel like the correct one. At just 37-years of age with no experience managing any club, Arteta made the switch to the Emirates from being Pep Guardiola's Assistant and Manchester City. Just 3 years after he had hung up his boots.

Blind faith, that what it was called and looked like. Especially given the fact that proven and highly experienced gaffers such as Carlo Ancelotti were available at the time of his appointment.

Well, it's still too early to say that the Spaniard has already changed the direction of the club. What's more certain is that he has brought the feel-good factor back to the squad, stamped his authority and communicated his vision of a playing style. Arteta is also working on repairing the bond between the club, fans and has already worked wonders in giving new opportunities to players such as Shkodran Mustafi and Granit Xhaka whose exits were imminent, often abused and scapegoated by fans. The kind of things that a rebuilding job will take at any club.

Results were still to improve at the time of the writing of this piece but there were enough reasons for the Arsenal faithful to start believing again.

Towards the promised land

Poetic justice says that anyone associated with Arsenal football club deserves a breather. A period of growth, better results, fun, challenging for the most important titles amongst others. But as we all know, this is not a perfect world nor some script in a book, 2020-30 might and might not still be their decade.

Only time will tell, but all hope is not lost.

HOW IS SOCCER KEEPING NIGER GIRLS IN SCHOOL?

Written By Margaret Mandeya

Education and football are working hand in glove to improve the lives of girls in Niger. The West African country is among the poorest in the world with the highest rates of early childhood marriage. A startling three in four adolescent girls are married before the age of 18, as a result, many girls do not finish school.

After dropping out of school and marrying at a young age, they lose out on the opportunities that education provides for young women. A football program that is funded by UNICEF is helping to change the status quo for many out-of-school girls in Niger. This program has been supporting soccer academies for young women, such as Academie Atcha in Niger's capital Niamey. The academy combines both academics and football which is an incentive for the girls to attend school while also playing the game, which has effectively increased the student retention rates. Through education, these young women are widening their options for their future. Over the past two years, UNICEF together with the National Football Federation has been organizing a national tournament for girls under the age of 17.

Breaking boundaries on and off the pitch

As a predominantly Muslim country, it is not common for girls to pursue a career in football. The young women who play the game are faced with gender stereotypes and restrictions that become obstacles for them. Niger's senior women's national team has also shared struggles to be accepted from the community which believes that women should never play football as a profession.

Despite the opposition from communities and religious leaders who disapprove of girls playing football, the families of the footballers give their full support to the girls. Football is not only giving the girls access to education but also gives these young women the confidence and agency to make decisions and use their talents to better their lives. In turn, the girls are changing the rules and using the game as a vehicle to pursue their dreams, break gender stereotypes and change perceptions in their communities.

"Football is not just a man's game. Girls can play as well. In the past, after school, I went to the playground where boys practice football, but they refused to play with me arguing that football is not a sport for girls. I was shocked, and in my neighborhood, not a single girl plays football."

— 16-year-old Cherifa

Football with a difference

It is the right of every child to get an education. Sadly, millions of girls around the world are robbed of this right. Organizations such as UNICEF which are committed to partnering with communities to transform the lives of children are playing a pivotal role in showing the positive impact that sport and education have on young women.

"The organization of this tournament goes beyond the question of sport. It aims above all to challenge stereotypes and gender norms. Sport can help girls to place themselves on an equal footing with boys...When girls play, when girls go to school, when girls are no longer victims of violence, when childhood is not shortcut by marriage, the world wins!"

— Felicite Tchibindat, UNICEF Representative in Niger

Nelson Mandela once said that "sport has the power to change the world." Football is more than just a game but a powerful force to support children and get them into school as is the case now in Niger. It builds confidence in their abilities and should be encouraged as they tackle the obstacles on and off the field. The young girls are breaking boundaries and shattering gender stereotypes despite being told by their community that they should not play football.



FIFA TO TURN BARCELONA'S CAMP NOU STADIUM INTO A SOCCER LABORATORY

Written By Farai Maringa

Introduction

To think that football would be associated with science would have been a mirage a decade ago! In today's world, anything is possible as we are gifted with an opportunity to get a glimpse into the initiative being managed by FIFA of turning Barcelona Football Club's stadium into a soccer laboratory for generations to come.

A full-scale renovation is due to begin in 2020 and be completed in 2024, bringing the iconic venue up to modern standards. The club is also eager for the stadium to be the largest sports experimentation and innovation laboratory in the world.

FIFA & FC Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium

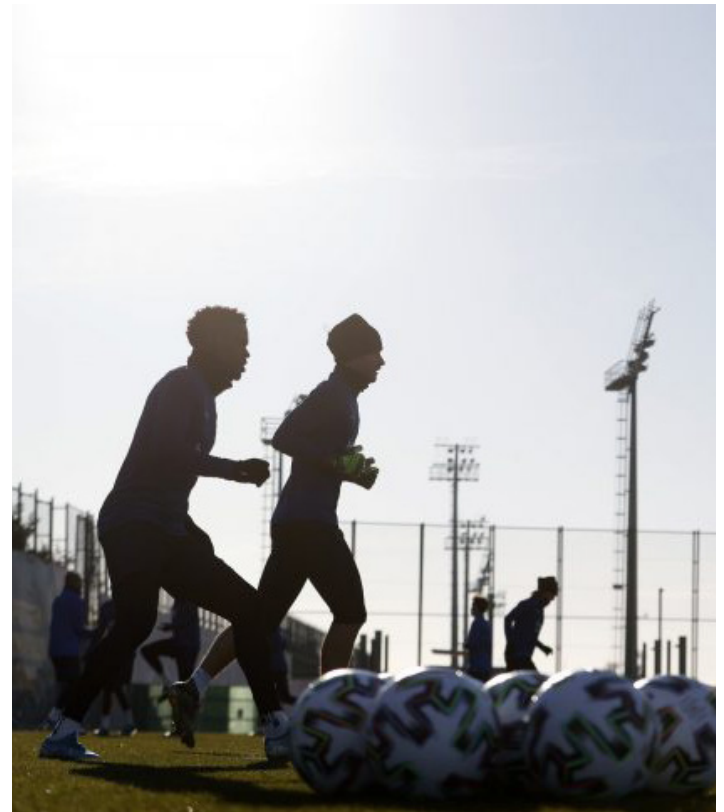
The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) is an association governed by Swiss law founded in 1904 and based in Zurich. Its goal, enshrined in its statutes, is the constant improvement of football through organizing international tournaments and sees its role as protecting and developing the game of football for everyone around the world. In sheer effort to raise the bar for international football, FIFA intends to use FC Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium as a testing laboratory in the field of sports technology.

FC Barcelona is a powerhouse in the La Liga Football league based in Spain and has won numerous trophies since it was established, and is home to some of the best football players in the world namely Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez. The club's Camp Nou stadium is one of the most famous soccer arenas in the world. It has an official capacity just shy of 100,000 and has played host to some of the most dramatic moments in the sport's history with most notably the 1999 UEFA Champions League final.



The Camp Nou stadium's maximum height is 48 meters, and it covers a whole surface area of 55,000 square meters with 250 meters in length and 220 meters in width. In accordance with UEFA stipulations, the playing area has been downsized to

105 meters x 68 meters. With a capacity of 99,354, it is now the biggest stadium in Europe. However, the total capacity has varied over the years owing to different modifications. When it was first opened in 1957, it held 93,053 spectators, which would be increased to 120,000 in 1982 on occasion of the FIFA World Cup. However, the introduction of new regulations outlawing standing areas reduced the stadium's capacity in the late 1990s to just fewer than 99,000.



Innovation hub origins and soccer laboratory concept

In the 1998-99 season, UEFA recognized the services and facilities at Camp Nou by awarding it a five-star status. In 2010, in line with the new UEFA regulations, this rating was replaced by the new 'Category 4' title which was bestowed to stadiums which fulfill the most demanding requirements with regards to facilities, services, and capacity such as FC Barcelona's stadium.

This new era was chosen for the Camp Nou, to make a precision study of monitoring systems used by companies that collect variables during football matches. These tests, carried out in several sessions during the month of October 2019, have focused on indicators of positioning, speed of the players and have been supervised by a team of experts from the University of Victoria in Australia, an entity that collaborates with FIFA on this project.

The measurements were thoroughly done with the help of thirty students from the Barcelona Campus of the National Institute of Physical Education of Catalonia (INEFC). To make them, a 30 x 30-meter quadrilateral was formed on the pitch, with ten cameras on each side, within which the students, with sensors attached to their bodies, made a physical circuit walking, jogging and sprinting, in different directions and with acceleration changes.

The monitoring systems of 13 leading international companies in the tracking sector have been subjected to these tests, including Track160, Catapult, Statsports, and Fittogether. The practical application of this study would be oriented to the analysis of the game for the coaches and the medical teams of the clubs, as well as to extend the quality of the sports broadcasts by providing more information.

The collaboration is being led by the La Liga giants' Barcelona Innovation Hub, which was formed in 2017 to help incubate innovations that will influence soccer from both a sporting and commercial perspective in the future. It's an initiative that brings together academia, students, start-ups and investors. The aim is to advance FC Barcelona as a technology organization and to share innovations in the field of sports, health and the environment.

Barcelona FC said the trials form part of their plans to transform the Nou Camp into a 'sports experimentation and innovation laboratory,' with the stadium set to undergo a strong revamp as part of the club's Espai Barça renovation project. It was also reported in March 2019 that Barcelona FC was looking to raise €100 million to start their own investment fund with a specific focus on trialing new technologies.

FIFA already held similar sessions a few months ago at the Miniestadi, which was home of FC Barcelona's reserve and female teams until last season. The world governing body FIFA turned the stadium into a testbed for monitoring systems that can collect data during games. Specifically, the trials focused on the positioning and speed of players.

Performing them now at the Camp Nou has allowed researchers to step forward and validate the tracking systems from much larger stands, similar to those in the most important stadiums in the world, and with more variety of spaces to test the radio frequency devices.

In 2017, it launched the "Barcelona innovation Hub," and the hub forms part of the "More than a club" mantra at Barcelona, which is viewed as a symbol of Catalan identity combined with a global brand.

Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu at the launch of the hub in 2017 explicitly stated that the club intends to add more value to the brand FC Barcelona which is owned by 150 000 members. "We are and we want to keep being more than a club. We had to generate a positive impact on society that goes beyond sport."

With this new experience, the Barça Innovation Hub keeps the door open to the football and sports technology industry and consolidates the club's facilities as a testing space, with the aim of turning FC Barcelona into the largest sports experimentation and innovation laboratory in the world.


FIFA altered its regulations in 2015 to allow for wearable technology during matches and provided all 32 nations at the last World Cup with access to a tablet-based Electronic Performance and Tracking System (EPTS). FIFA and Barcelona announced in November 2018 that they were teaming up to help clubs around the world better monitor their player data. Together they launched the Electronic Performance and Tracking Systems (EPTS), which allows clubs to exchange and compare information in a unified and standardized fashion.

EPTS delivered teams with match footage, alongside stats such as player positioning data, passing, pressing, speed and tackles, and was compatible with both camera and wearable-based systems. In the trials at the Camp Nou, the tracking systems of 12 different vendors were tested to determine their suitability.

It is hoped that more effective data tracking will help coaches with match preparation, allow for more effective player treatment, and to provide more insight to broadcasters. The initiative is noble and it will give football a better picture.

Parting word

Barcelona isn't the only soccer club putting technology at the heart of its strategy as rumors say that Manchester City has partnered with SAP to transform its on and off-pitch operations. In the future, it is inevitable that other big clubs such as Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain and Bayern Munich are likely to join this auspicious initiative to give the game of football a major upswing in performance, preparations and the actual play for players.



"The collaboration is being led by the La Liga giants' Barcelona Innovation Hub, which was formed in 2017 to help incubate innovations that will influence soccer from both a sporting and commercial perspective in the future. It's an initiative that brings together academia, students, start-ups and investors. The aim is to advance FC Barcelona as a technology organization and to share innovations in the field of sports, health and the environment."

— Farai Maringa, FirstTouch Africa

PARTING ”

NOTE

There you have it folks, we trust you have gotten something to reminisce over as we continue to #stayathome and help save lives. From the insights of how the FT 2020 Combine went down to big changes happening in the women's soccer world and zooming a little into the future with laboratory sport science, we have chewed it all.

Let us know what you want to see in our next newsletter. Stay informed and join the conversation through any of our social media handles.

Stay safe,

Dennis Takaendesa, Project Lead

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