

“Walking Alone”

by [Paul Sage](#) on Wednesday, February 2, 2011

It's 8:15 on a Saturday morning and I'm watching the final minutes of a football game on ESPN2. The football game is live and it's almost over and it's 8:15 in the morning and I'm the only person awake at my house, not counting the dog, who is not a person, unless you ask my kids. Or my wife. A dog is a dog, and Maddie the Golden Retriever puts her head in my lap and rolls her eyes upward at me while I watch Everton at Liverpool in the Barclays Premier League from England.

There is music. Beautiful music coming from the TV, *a capella, en masse*, sung by the Liverpool fans. A choir of intoxicated angels sing...

When you walk through a storm

Hold your head up high

And don't be afraid of the dark.

Liverpool is winning, or as the English would say, “Liverpool ARE winning.” Brits say a team is a THEY. Americans say a team is an IT. “Dallas HAS lost its last five playoff games” vs. “Manchester United HAVE won 27 titles.” Regardless of your grammatical preference, Liverpool, the home team, wins this morning and visiting Everton loses. The Everton supporters, all sitting in a designated section surrounded by security guards in orange vests and a buffer zone of empty seats, are instructed by the stadium announcer to remain in their seats until the joyous home fans depart. The armored orangemen, a painful reminder of past tragic and violent events at venues like this, will escort the disappointed Everton boosters out of Anfield, Liverpool Football Club's home stadium since 1892. That's right, 119 years in the same place. Anfield oozes history as do many other English playing grounds that are a century old, or older. And all we have left in America is Fenway Park and Wrigley Field. Sad.

At the end of the storm

Is a golden sky

And the sweet silver song of a lark

The Everton fans won't have far to walk. Their home stadium, Goodison Park, is just a Phil Mickelson 3-wood shot away. Visualize Yankee Stadium and Shea Stadium on opposite sides of Central Park. That's how close they are. They call this game the Merseyside Derby (pronounced “DAR-bee”). Liverpool is in Merseyside County and a derby is a match played between neighboring clubs.

I have a fondness for Everton. I feel bad for them the way I feel for the L.A. Clippers or the Chicago White Sox, or how I might have felt for the St. Louis Browns or Boston Braves. Nothing like being the #2 team in town. But in England your favorite team might even be #3 or #4 or #5 in its own city. Clubs on the north side of London are huddled together. You can walk from Chelsea to Fulham to Arsenal to Tottenham Hotspur. A big-league stadium on every corner, as ubiquitous as Starbucks. Stuffed into small clusters of densely populated Britain, the twenty teams of the Barclays Premier League are the most televised and among the best-known in the world.

Everton is also special to me because Tim Howard is its goalkeeper. Goalkeeper, not “goalie.” Goalies wear masks and brown leather sofa cushions and carry a big stick. Howard's a New Jersey-born American, like Bruce Springsteen, but taller. He's the goalkeeper for the USA World Cup team, a high school basketball star and a 2009 draft pick of the Harlem Globetrotters. No joke.

Let me stop and put the “football-vs.-soccer” discussion to bed. “Football” is a good name for this sport we Americans call “soccer” – the sport we play as kids and abandon as adults, unless we have kids who play it. There is a ball, and 22 guys are kicking it with their feet. That’s at least 21 more guys than kick an American “football.” This English game looks like FOOTball” to me. “Soccer” is a stretch of a derivation of “asSOCiation football.” The sport is governed by the F.A., the Football Association, in England, and worldwide by FIFA, the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association*. Oui. I’m going to keep calling it football. Some people call it a sling blade, I call it a Kaiser blade, mm-hmm.

Walk on through the wind,

Walk on through the rain,

Tho' your dreams be tossed and blown.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical *Carousel* premiered on Broadway in 1945. Seventeen years later Liverpool’s famously successful and colorful manager Bill Shankly fell in love with the play’s signature song, “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” and made it his team’s anthem. “You’ll Never Walk Alone” became a new pillar of the old Liverpool brand. Today the title adorns the team crest and an elaborate iron gate dedicated to Shankly at Anfield. Yes, I said Shankly was the team’s manager, not “head coach.” English football is like American baseball – the head guy is called a manager, except in England the manager doesn’t wear a player’s uniform, which I always thought was an awkwardly unique feature of America’s Pastime.

Why do I think English football is such a big deal, and how did I come to know it? Sometimes the funny little quirks of life lead you down a path of new discovery. It all began with my daughter Caroline’s twelfth birthday in January 2008. The kids had just received a Nintendo Wii game console for Christmas. Caroline was playing on a girls’ football team at the time, and we thought she’d like a game called “EA Sports FIFA ’08.” I quickly became the biggest user of FIFA ’08 in the house. Caroline felt cheated. *Mea culpa*. We bought another Wii game for Caroline – “Cooking Mama,” in which the player joins a team of Japanese characters to simulate kitchen work. I would sooner play “Ditch-Digging Daddy” or “Self-Induced Injury Sam,” but Caroline liked “Cooking Mama,” so we can call it even.

FIFA ’08 opened my eyes to a world of leagues, teams, and stadiums. Soon I started reading books like *Fever Pitch* by Nick Hornby, *Bloody Confused* by Chuck Culpepper. I listened to “World Football Daily” podcasts, spent time clicking through esnsoccernet.com and watched movies like “The Damned United,” a brilliant portrayal of the rise and fall of outspoken manager Brian Clough. I have learned enough to untie the Gordian Knot of European cups, titles, and championships.

Imagine NCAA March Madness starting in November and concluding in April, *simultaneous* to the regular college basketball season, and you get a small taste of the European football experience. A team might play three games in eight days, each with a different purpose: their home league, a national football association cup, and a European championship. And that doesn’t even include the breaks for international play, where a top player represents his country instead of his club. Wayne Rooney and Edwin Van Der Saar are Manchester United teammates, but when England plays the Netherlands they join their respective countries’ teams and go *mano a mano*. We see the same thing with players in the NHL. Every four years they run off to play Olympic hockey, but in football it happens all year, every year.

European football leagues work on a brilliantly simple principle of **promotion and relegation**. Every country has leagues divided into divisions, something like Major League Baseball and the triple-A, double-A kinds of layers of Minor League ball. The top minor league of English football is called the Coca-Cola Championship League. We then progress downward to League One, League Two, etc. This is where it gets cool. The top finishing teams from a lower tier move UP the next season, and the bottom teams move DOWN. If your team places in the top three of the Coca-Cola Championship League, you’ll be in the Premier League next season. Goodbye dinner theater, hello Broadway! Conversely, if you play

like a bunch of slackers, you're goin' down, buddy. Relegation. Like a Jack Welch-inspired cleansing of fifteen percent of a company's roster on a cold day in February. Which leads me to an unexpected observation: European football is more democratic, less socialized, and more unregulated than American pro sports. Promotion and relegation, no salary caps, advertising space on jerseys for sale to the highest bidder (including online gambling companies). Whoo-wee, Wall Street! We got ourselves a free market.

A few more reasons to love English football: No timeouts, no commercials except for halftime, limited substitutions, no instant replay, and games that last less than two hours. When the ball goes out of bounds the players don't wait for a referee to hand it to them. The player just picks it up, throws it in, and keeps playing.

"But soccer is boring, there's not enough scoring." I've heard that more than once. It takes a bit of a paradigm shift. Stop comparing this kind of football to American football or basketball. Think of it as more like baseball. Appreciate defensive play and scoreless stretches like you appreciate a pitchers' duel. Admire the level of stamina, skill, and geometric thinking it takes to do what these guys do. Note the symmetry of a tie ballgame.

Walk on, walk on

With hope in your heart

And you'll never walk alone,

You'll never walk alone

I will go to Liverpool some day. I will hear the crowd at Anfield sing "You'll Never Walk Alone," and I'll make my voice part of the chorus. I'll try to decipher the curious Liverpoolian dialect of Scouse, which sounds like a mix of English, Dutch, Yiddish and Navajo. I will pass through the Shankly Gate.

All right, then, who's going to Liverpool with me? Anyone, anyone, Bueller? I didn't think so. Being an English football fan in central Arkansas is often a lonely business. Maybe I can get my son Connor to go with me. Connor is eleven years old. He plays "classic soccer," a euphemism for spending large money on coaches with foreign accents, two sets of extra-spicy uniforms, and weekend stays at suburban hotels throughout the mid-south. If you haven't slogged through a wet and cold Germantown Invitational, you haven't lived. Connor loves to play but he doesn't often spectate. But he owes me. Maybe he'll go with me. Or maybe I'll walk alone.

"Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it's much more serious than that." - Bill Shankly



Shankly Gate @ Anfield, Liverpool, England