JON BERRY

PROJECT RESTART

From Prem to the Parks.
How Football Came Out of Lockdown.

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pitch

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Chapter 1

Lockdown. When we admitted it really was happening to us

I'll say it out loud. Football is important.

It's true that there are millions upon millions of people for whom it is a massive irrelevance. In many ways, people like me envy them. They go through life unburdened by anxiety about the performance of a bunch of athletes who wear laundry associated with their towns, cities and grandparents or who just happen to have made a simple, misguided fashion choice.

But for other millions, hundreds of millions in fact, football is important. I have no intention of dissecting arguments about it being a shield behind which men can hold conversations without having to reveal any true emotion: I have neither the expertise nor inclination to do so. Neither am I going to go down the road of

bemoaning its utter capitulation to the ugly dollar, although it's impossible to avoid comment about how it has done so.

I'm starting from the simple, and simplistic, position that football is important and that when it disappeared in the early spring of 2020 in the UK, it sent a clear signal that Covid-19 was established as an unwelcome fact of our lives. What this book does is to look at how it came back to life at every level from the lumberers on the parks to the humblest of semi-pros to the glitterati of the Premier League.

Our individual partings with the game will differ, but on a personal note, it could not have been more typical. On Saturday, 7 March, my team, Birmingham City, managed to bring an unbeaten run of ten games (six of them were draws) to an end with a lame defeat at home to Reading. Nothing unusual here. A downcast journey home but not something that a couple of pints wouldn't soon cure. Goodness knows, flat, disappointing performances against mediocre opponents is the very stuff of life. Maybe next week would be better: the triumph of hope over experience is the badge of all true supporters. High-flying West Brom away. You never know.

That same weekend, up in the higher reaches of the Premier League, the giants battled it out for the delight and diversion of its worldwide audience. There seemed

little to worry about. It's true that the government's committee for emergencies, COBRA, had met a couple of times, albeit not always graced by the presence of the Prime Minister, but his bumptious presence at the England–Wales rugby game reassured us all that there was nothing greatly amiss. The Cheltenham horse racing festival, attracting tens of thousands, was going ahead in the coming week and the city of Liverpool was about to welcome some 3,000 travelling fans from Madrid for a game on the evening of Wednesday 11th. On that same day, the Spanish government closed its schools and colleges and announced that the country had suffered 47 deaths from the virus – second only to Italy in terms of European fatalities. In the weeks that followed there was a spike in deaths related to Covid-19 on Merseyside by a factor of 3.5 in comparison with neighbouring areas. But the threat in those first days in March still seemed distant and remote.

By ten o'clock on the evening of Monday, 9 March, although we didn't know it at the time, the last ball had been kicked in the Premier League for three months as Leicester beat Aston Villa, aided by some truly comic defending and goalkeeping. Although Liverpool's game went ahead on the Wednesday, Arsenal's fixture against Manchester City, scheduled for the same day, was postponed. Some Arsenal players had been in contact with the owner of Olympiacos, Evangalos

Marinakis, who had contracted the disease and so this was deemed a sensible precaution – one that turned out to be rather more astute when it was announced next day that the Arsenal manager, Mikel Arteta, had also become infected. On Thursday, 12 March, Wolves went to Athens to play Olympiacos in a game played behind closed doors – and then that was that. Although some games were played in the National League, England's fifth tier, on Saturday, 14 March, football at the top level was put on hold by the end of the week as all fixtures were called off. At that point there was one recorded death caused by Covid-19 in the UK.

In the groundhog weeks that followed, the world became unrecognisable; we'll all harbour our own lessons and memories. The awful truth of lives lived precariously and dogged by disadvantage became evident to us all. This book is not the medium through which to comment on the utter hopelessness with which this was addressed by so many world leaders, but there is no doubting some of the crass incompetence which prevented any chance of early control over the virus. And yet, through it all, as the problems of wages, rents, businesses, education, social care and the health service held proper sway over public discourse, one question doggedly popped up like an irrelevant, irritating whack-a-mole: when will football start again? In fact, there was a range of ways that football found its way into public

debate almost from the start of the crisis. Because it's important.

Footballers and their earnings are a constant source of outraged delight for us all. In what can only be a throwback to the game's working-class roots, their payment is always expressed as a weekly wage, somehow prompting the odd image of them having to line up on a Friday at the desk of the CEO who hands them their earnings in a square, brown envelope. Among fans, there is a grudging acceptance that those at the very top of the game might just merit the jaw-dropping sums that come their way, but that journeymen pros from Middle Europe should consider themselves bloody fortunate. Ever since the maximum wage (yes, younger readers, you read that right) was abolished and Johnny Haynes became the first £100-a-week footballer in 1961, the income of those who do nothing more than punt a ball about a field has been fair game for general disapproval, especially from those not infatuated with the beautiful game. For most players, however, the life-changing largesse of the stars is entirely unattainable; the early days of the virus made this startlingly clear.

Trawl through as much information as you can, and the business of nailing footballers' wages seems to be more art than science. Nevertheless, most reliable figures indicate that average weekly wages slope downwards from £50,000 in the Premier League to £11,000 in the

Championship (a figure distorted by relegated teams encumbered with top-level contractual obligations), £2,300 in the third division in League One and down to around £1,100 in the fourth. These figures reveal that there exists in society a very small group of talented young men who, as long as they behave prudently and are well advised, should never have to want for anything in their lives. Others should be able to establish networks and expertise that will allow them a comfortable future existence and others still have the opportunity to give themselves a leg-up for when they quit the professional game, probably in their mid-30s. Quite why it was that the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, felt it necessary to single out this particular constituency, just as the seriousness of the situation crowded in on us like a dark fog, is something only he and his colleagues can answer.

On Thursday, 2 April the death toll in England had reached 561. However poor our maths may have been, we were becoming familiar with the notion of exponential growth and the critical importance of infection rates. Those who had not been paralysed by concern about their income and the welfare of loved ones found thousands of ways to contribute to the common good. A government scheme asking for volunteers was soon overwhelmed as over half a million people signed up. With all this going on, on 2 April Hancock chose to make this statement:

> *I think that everybody needs to play their part in this national effort and that means Premier League footballers too. Given the sacrifices that many people are making, including some of my colleagues in the NHS who have made the ultimate sacrifice of going in to work and have caught the disease and have sadly died, I think the first thing that Premier League footballers can do is make a contribution, take a pay cut and play their part.*

I can't be certain, but my strong suspicion is that, unlike some major companies who operate on UK soil, footballers pay their taxes. It is also very well documented that many of them, particularly those from disadvantaged parts of the world, make huge contributions to their home communities. The same goes for dozens who support charities and foundations in the localities of their clubs. In those early weeks of lockdown, the conduct of some of the country's leading industrialists and entrepreneurs, who sat on their hands and asked for bailouts as their workers lay awake frantic with worry, went unremarked upon by government politicians. Footballers, on the other hand, got a special mention. Why? Because football is important.

Hancock's ill-advised observations drew justifiably irritated responses from players. Comments from

Newcastle's Danny Rose, who had already shown himself unafraid to speak out about racism in the game, were typical of the reaction of many of his colleagues: 'It was just not needed for people who are not involved in football trying to tell footballers what to do with their money.' It later emerged that Rose had already made a five-figure donation to a hospital that had previously treated him for injury.

On 5 April, Wayne Rooney in his *Sunday Times* column questioned the Health Secretary's motives with admirable incisiveness:

> *Not every footballer is in the same position. Yet suddenly the whole profession has been put on the spot with a demand for 30 per cent pay cuts across the board. Why are footballers suddenly the scapegoats? How the past few days have played out is a disgrace. He [Hancock] was supposed to be giving the nation the latest on the biggest crisis we've faced in our lifetimes. Why was the pay of footballers even in his head? Was he desperate to divert attention from his Government's handling of this pandemic?*

In yet another instance in the crisis of government ministers stubbornly failing to consult people who may actually know something, Hancock would have been

better served if he'd made himself aware of what was happening beyond his narrow experience. Liverpool's Jordan Henderson had already approached captains in the top flight to coordinate an initiative to take pay cuts and contribute to NHS funding. Within days of his doing so, representatives of the English Football League (the body charged with oversight of the three divisions below the Premier League) worked towards a voluntary agreement whereby players would defer some of their wages for April – with a telling exemption for those whose earnings were a world away from the stratospheric payments of screaming headlines.

Before any of this had happened, Gary Neville had closed his two Manchester hotels to the public and opened them to NHS workers free of charge. There were no staff redundancies in either establishment.

The contrast between his actions and those of some of the owners of Premier League clubs was stark. Even before Hancock's comments, Newcastle had placed all non-playing staff on furlough, shortly to be followed by Liverpool and Tottenham. In the case of the latter, the revelation that the owner, Daniel Levy, had been awarded a £3 million bonus for completing the new stadium on time – it was very late – served to further increase the ire of the supporters' groups who became instrumental in the decision to reverse the move. In Liverpool the voice of supporters also prevailed. In

Newcastle, Mike Ashley, that very model of the modern entrepreneur, remained resolute, holding out on a decision – despite pleas from the players – until the club had been sold to a Saudi-backed conglomerate (spoiler alert – the sale fell through). The views of Matt Hancock on the actions of these owners does not seem to be a matter of public record.

Even as the numbers of deaths began to be measured in thousands, concern about the future of all professional sport took root in public discourse. Would the current season finish? If so, how would that be arranged? Might there be something morally questionable about considering such arrangements when some nurses were still making face masks out of old flannels and kitchen roll? On talk shows and empty rolling-news sports bulletins, most pundits and commentators did a sensible job of qualifying all the speculation with the proper observation that football was, at best, the most important of the unimportant things in life. The more the discussion and debate about the possibility of returning to any form of competitive football unfolded, the more obviously complex it became. Nonetheless, the return of top-level football installed itself with increasing force as some sort of signal that a kind of normality was achievable.

As the pandemic swamped all aspects of public and private lives, the UK government did its level best to

deflect attention from international comparisons. As the numbers grew inexorably higher than those in Spain and Italy, the daily press briefing from Downing Street became an increasingly squirmy affair for whichever poor sap had drawn that day's short straw. In footballing terms, France and Holland had already given up the ghost, as had Scotland, notwithstanding a hilariously inept legal challenge from aggrieved Rangers. Belarus provided the only startling exception to this footballing blackout. Its leagues continued, encouraged, no doubt, by the Trump-like pig-ignorant view of its leader, Alexander Lukashenko, that no one was going to die of coronavirus in Belarus unless they were old or obese. There were 20,000 cases and 116 deaths by the start of May. Crowds flocked to the games in their dozens.

The four biggest European leagues – those in England, Germany, Spain and Italy – expressed a determination to see matters completed for the season. Germany's thorough and systematic testing arrangements meant that infection and death rates remained significantly lower than those in the UK. On 7 May, Chancellor Merkel announced that the Bundesliga would resume a week later. Whether this had any effect on the actions of the UK government can only be a matter for conjecture, but at around the same time, ministers again decided it was time to start talking about football.

Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, the man who had found himself pallidly clinging on to the podium during Boris Johnson's illness, expressed the view that the return of the Premier League would 'lift the spirits of the nation'. Now Raab is a karate black belt, so he understands sporting endeavour and he's probably not a man with whom to find yourself in a personal tangle. All the same, this must have sounded a bit rich (if you'll pardon the pun) to the players. One week you're the greedy scoundrels pinching an inflated wage when the rest of the nation is struggling to make ends meet; the next, you're the guardians of the country's morale. Let's be generous to Raab and his colleagues and not ask exactly how your morale will be lifted if the completion of these games ended in disaster for the team you support. Football, in all its importance, was almost certainly coming back to public life.

In mid-May the Bundesliga resumed. Just in case we all thought those clear-headed Germans had it all sussed, there were some hilariously strange contradictions in how the games were set up. Unsurprisingly, as soon as competitive instinct took over, full physical contact resumed as normal. Players pushed, shoved and jostled and breathed down each other's necks. Meanwhile, in the stands, substitutes sat at least two metres from each other in masks which were duly removed the moment they entered the field of play. Players bumped elbows

or fists in celebration but forgot not to give each other a quick hug at the final whistle. On our sofas and chat groups we toyed, half-heartedly, with the idea of adopting a team to support. A careful scouring of the web reveals no indication as to whether this odd spectacle – enhanced by the use of cardboard cut-out crowds in some instances – did anything to raise German national morale.

What it did do was go a long way to honouring the contract between the league and the broadcasters. One can only imagine the urgency that this injected into various virtual boardrooms throughout the UK, but by the end of May, Project Restart became an entity – at least in the minds of the paymasters at Sky and BT. Tests for Covid-19, so difficult to locate and carry out, even for some of the most important key workers, became available for players and staff. Awkward individuals like Troy Deeney, who wanted to remind us that BAME players were at significant statistical risk and that not all players lived in glorious isolation in remote mansions, were given airtime, but their concerns were brushed aside. In a reflection of a national narrative that privileged the need to return to comfortable familiarity rather than confront infection and death rates that remained stubbornly high, the Premier League scheduled its return for the middle of June.

On the evening of Wednesday, 17 June, exactly 100 days after the whistle blew on Leicester and the Villa at the King Power Stadium, the Premier League returned to TV screens. In a delicious twist of fate, it had been a footballer who had dominated the front-page headlines for the previous two days. Marcus Rashford had conducted his own high-profile campaign to dissuade the government from scrapping free school-meal vouchers during the summer holidays. With all the foresight and firmness of purpose it had exhibited in the previous three months, the government almost immediately effected a welcome change of policy. And as if to prove that the whirligig of time really does bring in its revenges, Health Secretary Matt Hancock – he who had led the charge for these spoilt brats of players to take a pay cut – promptly forgot Rashford's name when being questioned about what the player's actions had achieved.

By the time the top clubs, followed shortly after by those in the Championship, took to the field, those in the lower divisions had had their fates all but tidied up. With no TV income to offset expenses, most of these clubs were faced with staging games – and thus incurring expenditure on wages and other resources – at what had to be a financial loss. A points-per-game calculation granted promotion to those in the automatic places and relegation for those similarly placed. Play-offs

remained for those still in with a chance of climbing a division.

On the very evening of the restart, Barrow had their promotion from the National League confirmed. Six other clubs, with some significant Football League pedigree among them – Halifax, Barnet, Notts County, Yeovil, Harrogate and Boreham Wood – would contest a convoluted play-off arrangement, staged at their own cost and incurring a further £100,000 between them to carry out the necessary testing for the virus. Things were beginning to take some sort of shape. On the field of play, in an attempt, perhaps, to effect some kind of symmetry with the flaky goalkeeping of the last game before lockdown, Villa keeper Ørjan Nyland pretty well carried the ball into the Holte End only to be reprieved by a cataclysmic failure of both goal-line technology and the application of VAR. Welcome back to football.

What follows in this book is an attempt to capture something of what football was like during this strange, other-worldly period. If ever a word has been done to death since March, it is 'unprecedented' – but there is no disputing its aptness. The chapters that follow present a contemporaneous account of what happened to a range of clubs as football stumbled back to life. The choice of clubs is almost, but not entirely, random. There is an attempt to get a view across a range of settings and to give voice to a range of opinions. However, final choices

were made for me, particularly at the higher level, by the willingness of those connected with the dozens of clubs I approached to respond to my initial approaches, made in early May 2020.

There was always going to be a problem. As no one's ever said on *Mastermind*, 'I've started, but I've no idea how I'll finish.' My intention was to paint a picture of clubs and supporters and assess how they were gearing up to the season that was about to finish in splendid TV or streamed isolation. I wanted to track and trace, if you'll pardon the expression, their progress as they approached the new season. You'll have spotted an immediate flaw: precisely when that new season was going to start and under what circumstances was a mixture of hope and guesswork. I make no apology if that uncertainty hovers over much of what follows, but I do hope that what emerges is as clear and as honest an account of what our relationship with football looked and felt like in those troubled months from March 2020.