

What next for sports washing in a post-Abramovich era?

Sunday 13th March. Chelsea vs Newcastle. The 'Sportswashing Derby'. England's 'Game of Shame'. The recently frozen Russian asset vs Saudi Arabia. Less than 72 hours later, Boris Johnson touched down in Riyadh, needing an oil deal with the latter as it is now politically untenable to rely on energy from the former. Football is now tied up in something far bigger than itself.

Dirty money and human rights abuses have been washed through English football clubs for the best part of two decades. However, Roman Abramovich's close ties to Vladimir Putin amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine have brought the ownership of English football clubs intensely under the microscope. Add in the well-documented records of the owners of Manchester City and Newcastle United and it is clear that English football has a serious problem.

The public pressure on club fans

Fans often are made to face much of the public pressure for the abuses of their club's owners. Is this fair? Chelsea fans have revelled in the success under Abramovich - but now face repercussions for his ownership. Their club is now a frozen asset that faces an uncertain future while they are also unable to purchase tickets to upcoming games.

Liam Fitzpatrick, a Chelsea fan of 14 years, has never been fully supportive of the owner despite enjoying the success.

"I've always been wary of celebrating Roman Abramovich the person," he said. "There is a small portion of Chelsea fans who are still backing Abramovich and those people are idiots and should be ashamed of themselves.

"However, it's also not fair for people to tell me I am wrong for supporting my club. I have supported them since I was five when I had no clue about politics and you can't change your football team."

The failures of the footballing authorities

Fans have no power to choose who owns their club. They can hold no responsibility for the dealings of their club's owners and can hardly be blamed for enjoying on-field success and investment in their local areas. They have not been the facilitators of English football's fall into the sport washing mire.

Those controlling the game have consistently failed to clamp down on the national sport being abused by those looking to improve their image. The FA have never placed a test on the human rights record of prospective owners - allowing them to slide into the national sport largely unopposed. FIFA, UEFA and the Government are also complicit.

James Todd has supported Newcastle for the last 12 years. He was not opposed to the recent Saudi takeover of the club and blames footballing authorities for the current situation.

“The responsibility to stop it should be on the powers that be. They are the ones that opened the floodgates to this kind of investment and have made it incredibly difficult to stop,” he said.

“I would rather have the money in my team than someone else's.”

The most important thing for many fans is how the team performs on the pitch and not what goes on off it. The likelihood of this is much higher with the investment of sports washers. After all, if the Prime Minister sees these people as being good enough to do business with then why shouldn't they be good enough for the fans?

Can we still justify turning a blind eye?

This does not mean that fans should turn a blind eye to the actions of their owners. The past few weeks have starkly highlighted the importance of understanding those behind our football clubs.

Vayam Lahoti has followed Manchester City for over 13 years. He has always been conflicted between wanting success for his club and Sheikh Mansour's human rights record.

“It is something that I constantly think about,” he said. “It does bother me but then would I rather have a club that isn't challenging, competing and investing? It makes it a very tricky situation for me.

“However, we should all make more of an effort to find out more about our owners, where they come from and their backgrounds. We need to be satisfied with who we call our owners.”

Sportswashing, football and the future

The hardest thing for many fans will, perhaps, be disconnecting the issue from the sport's environment. With the passion that comes with supporting their team, debates can become very adversarial very quickly.

"This is a nuanced issue and football is tribalistic, football fans by their very nature are tribal beings," Liam says.

"Any attack against anything connected to the club can quickly start to seem like a witch hunt in the minds of many supporters."

How football comes to terms with this issue will be crucial to how the sport progresses over the coming years. Fans should not be made to feel responsible for their owner's actions or ashamed to celebrate on-field success. However, we can no longer be blind to flagrant human rights abuses committed by the sports washers and we must educate ourselves.

The ultimate responsibility is on the authorities to crack down on the dirty practices within our national sport - but it is clear the ownership of football clubs cannot continue in its current form.