



Australasian  
Association  
of Writing  
Programs

# TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 63 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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To cite this article: Forrest, D. & McGowan, L. (2021). Behind the goal: Exploring the football (soccer) goal net through object biography and creative non-fiction. In M. Seward and D. Wain (Eds.) *Writing through things 2: The thing as writing prompt*. TEXT Special Issue 63.

## University of the Sunshine Coast

### David Forrest and Lee McGowan

#### **Behind the goal: Exploring the football (soccer) goal net through object biography and creative non-fiction**

Abstract:

Football (soccer) and its extended culture have been studied extensively. In contrast, the goal net, an essential part of the game's equipment, has undergone very little scrutiny in academic research or creative non-fiction. The goal net consists of a nylon net drawn across a rectangular frame, often supported by angled stanchions. Positioned at parallel ends of a rectangular football pitch, they provide the target for opposing teams in the course of a match. During play, the goal net is regularly transformed from perfunctory piece of sporting equipment into artefact, imbued with narrative and aesthetic meaning. Creative non-fiction is a long-established critical approach and means of exploration of football, its play, its participants, traditions, and stories (see Wilson, 2013; Winner, 2012[2000]; Goldblatt, 2006; Bellos, 2002; and Hornby, 1992). The theory and concepts of object biography posit that objects must be examined as if they, like humans, have or have had a life story (Kopytoff, 1986; see also Brown, 2000; Gosden & Marshall, 1999). Creative non-fiction related to football rarely examines the life stories of those objects employed in the game. This paper employs textual and contextual analyses (See Belsey, 2011; McKee, 2003), theoretical frameworks offered by object biography, and a famous goal in the Népstadion, Hungary, from 1981, to examine the oft-neglected goal net's dramatic influence on the visual narrative of a key element of football: a goal scored.

Biographical note:

David Forrest is a researcher at the University of the Sunshine Coast. His primary research interests are in football studies, visual arts history, and creative non-fiction. His Masters (2021) project included what may just be the first investigation of the goal net in creative non-fiction. While his PhD research project focuses on the Italian Masters, he has written about Latin American Masters of football for *The Guardian* and *In Bed With Maradona*.

Dr Lee McGowan is a Senior Lecturer at the University of the Sunshine Coast. His primary research interests are in football studies, creative writing, and digital narratives. In 2019, he published the monograph *Football in Fiction: A History* (Routledge) and co-authored the book, *Never Say Die: The Hundred-Year Overnight Success of Australian Women's Football* (NewSouth). Alongside a number of traditional research outputs, his most recent project, a digital museum launched at Parliament House (2021), is a history of football in Queensland, funded by Football Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane City Council, and Arts Queensland.

Keywords: goal net, object biography, football writing, soccer writing, creative non-fiction

## Introduction

Football (soccer) and its culture have been studied extensively (see Williams, 2017; 2003; Guschwan, 2016; Penny & Redhead, 2009, Guilianotti & Robertson, 2004; among others). However, the goal net has undergone very little scrutiny in academic research, in mainstream media, or in creative non-fiction. The latter is one of the most prodigious forms of football writing and long established as a critical approach and means of exploration of the game's pervasive culture. The investigative processes afforded by the theory and concepts of object biography enable examination of an object's life story and the ways object agency can be revealed and recognised (Kopytoff, 1986). In drawing on an illustrative example, Trevor Brooking's famous goal in the Népstadion, Hungary, in 1981, this paper will examine the goal net, its presentation in creative non-fiction related to football, and leverage the theory of object biography to examine one goal net's dramatic influence on the visual narrative of a key element of football, a goal scored. The paper's three key components – the goal net, creative non-fiction related to football, and object biography – are now introduced.

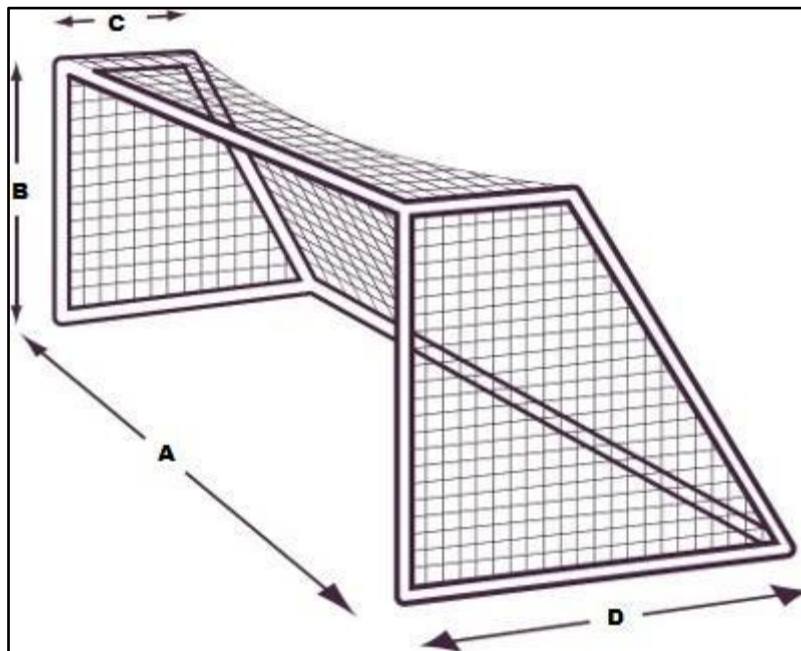


Figure 1. The goal frame, net, and supporting stanchions (First Team, n.d.)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the goal net consists of a nylon-netted material, usually white, drawn across a rectangular frame positioned at each end of a standard football pitch. This frame is made up of two vertical posts of equal height at a set distance apart, connected at their tops by a longer horizontal 'crossbar'. The goal net, which would otherwise hang from the crossbar, is given its full form through the support of angled stanchions. One goal net is placed on each of the short sides of a rectangular football pitch. They are connected to, but outside, the field of play. They form the decisive target to be attacked and defended by teams of players during a football match. When the ball enters the goal net, crossing the goal line – marked on the ground horizontal to the crossbar – it signifies a goal being scored. The goal net has a lengthy history. Almost, but not quite as long as that of the modern game, which was established in 1863. Yet, it lacks a proportionate level of documentation. In a simple game now structured with layers

of increasingly complex regulation, the goal net also lacks formalisation. Examination of this necessary but perfunctory and seemingly invisible piece of the game's equipment can reveal a deeper understanding and recognition of the object's place and import in football.

One of the, if not *the*, most significant works of creative non-fiction related to football is Nick Hornby's autobiographical football fan narrative, *Fever Pitch* (1992). Its significance is derived from its lasting and unprecedented critical and commercial success and the timing of its publication. Hornby's text arrived at, and at once heralded, a cultural shift in the game (Hill, 2006), the beginning of its transition from what was primarily a working-class pursuit, commonly known as *The People's Game* (Walvin, 1994 [1975]), toward the muscular economic engines we see in contemporary elite clubs and international tournaments governed by FIFA (see Cleland, 2017; and Millward, 2017; for consideration of the English Premier League). A range of additional contributory factors played their part in this cultural shift, including the power of the agent (Kelly & Chatziefstathiou, 2018), the import of broadcast rights (Millward, 2017; 2011), and changes in approaches to the sport's consumption (Dixon, 2016). They sit outside the primary focus of this paper and are not discussed. *Fever Pitch*, however, is held wholly responsible for the instigation of mainstream acceptance and subsequent proliferation of creative non-fiction related to the game (McGowan, 2019). In order to provide necessary context and highlight key characteristics of creative non-fiction related to football, this paper considers a small number of illustrative exemplars. At the time of writing, the goal net is yet to be more fully explored in this form.

The theoretical analysis presented in this paper is informed by the ways the interrogation of an object's agency can be revealed and recognised (Kopytoff, 1986). Presentation of an object within a biographical frame, as Igor Kopytoff argues, enables assessment and analysis of cultural, aesthetic, historical, and even political responses to the object, which can divulge a great deal about its nature and those with whom it interacts (1986). An object – in this case, a goal net – can be seen to illustrate its ties to communities and societies (Gosden & Marshall, 1999), and events played in front of it. The goal net, like other objects crucial to football, is ordinarily approached through the lens of sports performance or at least its enhancement within the discipline of sports science or is examined across a linear historical narrative. This paper builds on the premise that the study of an object's 'storied life' elicits understanding beyond the object's physical make-up or purpose. It takes the common anthropocentric focus of creative non-fiction related to football as its starting point and draws on concepts related to object biography to illuminate the central object, the goal net, as an actor in the game.

A brief contextual analysis of the goal net's historical development and place in the game is followed by an equally brief textual analysis (Belsey, 2011; McKee, 2003) of some of the characteristics of creative non-fiction related to football. The ground prepared, the paper then considers the goal net through a biographical analysis of a famous goal scored by England striker, Trevor Brooking, in Hungary in 1981, an incident that significantly altered our understanding of the goal net's visibility and broader place in the game.

## The goal net

Football's current economic power grew out of the cultural shift that began with the 1990 FIFA World Cup finals in Italy (Rookwood & Hughson, 2017). Marked by Hornby's text and the game's embrace by the middle-classes, it crystallised with the establishment of the English Premier League in 1992 and the reformatting of the elite European competition, the UEFA Champions League, in the same year (see Sandvoss, 2003). The game's capacity for revenue generation, however, had been intimated, if not fully realised some years earlier with the engagement of worldwide television audiences and lucrative multi-tiered and product segmented advertising introduced at the 1982 FIFA World Cup finals in Spain (Goldblatt, 2006). Though largely unnoticed, a key ramification of this commercialisation process was the standardisation of the goal net. At the 1982 tournament, a rectangular box-shaped net without supports, a style of goal net first recognised as a uniform design at the 1974 World Cup finals in West Germany, replaced the local, highly differentiated goal nets at major Spanish stadiums, such as Estadio Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid and Camp Nou in Barcelona. This box-shaped style of goal net is now the standard in elite competitive football.

The dimensions of the goal, its crossbar, and posts, and line-markings of the pitch, including the goal line running parallel to the cross bar, are defined with precision by the *Laws of the Game* prescribed by the governing body, the International Football Association Board (IFAB). The Laws state preferences for the pitch's size (90-120 x 45-90 metres), colour (green), and make-up (grass); match duration (two halves of 45 minutes each); and for line-markings – the now universally-recognised equitable halves including penalty (18-yard box) and goal (six-yard box) areas complete with penalty spots (11 metres or 12 yards from the goal line) and arcs (or Ds). The Laws dictate conduct of play, among them: outfield players not touching the ball with their hands during play; the whole ball crossing the touchline (outer boundary) to be out of play; and the whole ball crossing the goal line between the goal posts for a goal to be scored. Yet the goal net, an essential part of the game, a seemingly ever-present piece of equipment, is not mandated (IFAB, 2018).

Football's evolution as a professional sport, its rule changes, innovation in its play, and resolution of authoritative governance have all been processes of collaborative agreement and negotiation. Invented and introduced in Liverpool, England, in 1891, by engineer John Brodie (Foster, 2020), the goal net is no different. The crossbar, which replaced a piece of string, was invented in Sheffield in 1857 and only made compulsory across the English Football Association competition in 1882. The uniform 24 feet between the posts was applied as a rule in 1863. There were no line-markings, the goal posts and a flag at each corner indicated the outer reaches of a pitch up to 200 yards long and 100 wide – modern line-markings were arrived at four decades later in 1902. Between 1891 and 1982, the most popular style of goal net in football competitions in the United Kingdom was the A-shaped structure featuring a full-length stanchion, depicted in Figure 1. In Latin America, where the game achieved prodigious popularity in the 1920s (Goldblatt, 2006), a short L-shaped support became the favoured method of bracing the net. Central and Eastern European clubs held a preference for a smaller triangular stanchion positioned at and attached to the upper end of each post. This profusion of

variety, and lack of formalisation, meant that throughout its first ninety years in use, the goal net could be seen to differentiate individual stadiums across the nations and territories of world football (211 member associations will compete to play in the 2022 edition of the quadrennial FIFA World Cup tournament).

Unlike those other fundamental components of football, the goal net remains unregulated, and non-mandatory. Its standardisation is a result of conformity rather than strict adherence to governance. Exceptions and outliers exist. The Népstadion goal net, which was not replaced by the standard box-shaped style until season 1998/99, is one such example. In order to highlight the goal net's role – the marking of a goal – and the increased significance that comes with the consideration of historic, aesthetic, and cultural perspectives, it is important to consider the presentation of the goal net in creative non-fiction.

### **Creative non-fiction related to football**

*Fever Pitch* (1992) is a carefully plotted, reflexive, epistolic, literary account of Hornby's obsession with English football club Arsenal FC. The book's publication, coinciding as it did with the aforementioned structural and economic changes in the game, speaks to subsequent effects on football's support (see Cleland, 2010). Its close narration and analysis of the football fan experience, and the unprecedented acclaim it received, resulted in the book playing a persuasive role in blurring the boundaries around football's position in popular culture and making football desirable to the British middle-classes (see Piskurek, 2018; Hill, 2006; Cox et al., 2002). The book is also considered to be highly influential in igniting a substantive increase in interest and production of literary writing related to the game, particularly in creative non-fiction (McGowan, 2019).

For the most part, football writing in mainstream media is related to the quotidian machinations of the sport and regular professional competition coverage. With its capacity to draw on the tools and techniques of creative writing (see Brien, 2019; Gutkind, 2018; Williams, 2013; Gerard, 2001), creative non-fiction presents a richer diversity of approaches to and perspectives on the game, from serious and often sombre deeply personal examinations that echo Hornby's work to more romanticised considerations of events and football's broader cultural meaning. These explorations of the wider, sociological, political, cultural, and economic aspects of niche subjects within the game have established their creators as authorities, philosophical and otherwise, within the practice of football writing (Piskurek, 2018; Das, 2017). A contextual review of the substantive production of the literary football writing *Fever Pitch* reveals the form's position as the prevailing critical approach and means of exploration of the game, its history, and its culture (McGowan, 2019). The first, arguably ground-breaking example, Pete Davies' pre-*Fever Pitch* work, *All Played Out: The Full Story of Italia '90* (1990), is a novel-length analysis of an England World Cup campaign that makes use of a conversational narrative style, which allows a prominent authorial presence. Across three decades, works such as this have provided football-related insight across a variety of subjects, including: travel writing (McGinnis, 1999; Parks, 2003); class and culture (Hopcraft, 2013 [1968]); economics (Kuper & Szymanski, 2009; Foer, 2004); (vast tracts of) biography on players, coaches, and

key figures; and confessional accounts of the fan experiences. The latter range widely, from meditations on rainy stadium terraces (Pearson, 1994 [2004]; Connor, 2005) to visceral accounts of violent hooligan sub-cultures (Dart 2008; Redhead 2004). While these works highlight contextual, conceptual, and material considerations of the game's culture, they do not, it should be noted, reflect similar levels of analysis on its objects or their stories. Examples are rare.

In academia, preeminent football historian Jean Williams (2014) has detected an ambiguity in the design of British and Continental football boots and contributed to a study on replica shirts (Stride et al., 2015). In creative non-fiction, pop culture historian, Neal Heard, explored the history of a similar aspect of football apparel in his book, *The Football Shirt: The Connoisseur's Guide* (2018). Historian of architecture, Simon Inglis studied *Football Grounds of Britain* (1996) against a backdrop of physical, critical, and political responses to the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster, where ninety-seven fans (Conn & Vinter, 2021) lost their lives as a result of the inept and inadequate actions of South Yorkshire Police. Creative non-fiction related to football, which is more likely to focus on events, matches, or a player's actions, appears to take the goal net for granted. Even where these works recall a famous goal in detail, their analysis tends to minimise discussion of the goal net. In the following example, from Hornby's dramatised memoir (Piskurek, 2018), the author vividly recalls his emotional response to Arsenal's winning goal in the 1979 FA Cup final:

When the game restarted, Liam Brady took the ball deep into the United half (afterwards he said that he was knackered, and was only trying to prevent the loss of a third goal) and pushed it out wide to Rix. I was watching this, but not *seeing* it; even when Rix's cross came over and United's goalkeeper Gary Bailey missed it, I wasn't paying much attention. But then Alan Sunderland got his foot to the ball, poked it in, right into the goal in front of us, and I was shouting not 'Yes' or 'Goal' or any of the other noises that customarily come to my throat at these times but just a noise, AAARRRRGGGGHHHH... (Hornby, 1992, p. 104)

The passage echoes many such, though less significant, goal descriptions in the text. The players' actions, the ball's movement, and the scoring of the goal are all captured. Hornby notes his usual response to a similar scenario and, while neglecting to note any detail regarding the Wembley goal net that played such a key part in the scene, he notes his own atavistic response to this particular event. His conversational, reflective, even intimate tone and employment of a range of literary techniques provided the benchmark for the succession of refined existential confessionals that would follow. Examples include: *The Far Corner: A Mazy Dribble through North-East Football* (Pearson, 2004 [1994]); Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano's treatise, *In Sun and Shadow* (2003 [1997]); and *My Favourite Year* (1993), an anthology edited by Hornby that featured a number of leading literary writers, including D.J. Taylor, Giles Smith, and Roddy Doyle.

David Winner's *Brilliant Orange: The Neurotic Genius of Dutch Football* (2012 [2000]), which examines the links between Dutch football and the wider Dutch culture, raised the expectational bar for creative non-fiction related to football. For example, as Winner examines the Dutch team's 2-1 loss to an inferior West German side in the 1974 World Cup final, his

discussion of the match reflects what he sees as the cause of a national, psychological trauma – a trauma Winner compares to effects of JFK’s assassination on the peoples of the United States of America (2012 [2000]), before utilising the lyrics of a song by The Doors as a lament:

To the Dutch the next few moments are like a nightmare; it’s the moment when Jack and Jackie wave happily to the camera as their car turns into Dealey Plaza. Bonhof drills a low cross into the centre where Gerd Muller reacts quickest and gets his foot to the ball. Muller’s touch is odd: he knocks the ball backwards, three for four feet *away* from the Dutch goal. The danger momentarily seems past. But Muller leaps backwards and in a single movement maintains his balance, wraps his right leg all the way around the ball and hits it towards the far corner. The action looks physically impossible. “This is the End” as the Jim Morrison song goes... (Winner, 2012 [2000], p. 81)

Winner’s description of Gerd Muller’s winning goal highlights the author’s capacity to bind football discussion to broader cultural perspectives, such as agriculture and architecture. The presence of the goal net, vital to this moment in history, is however entirely absent from the narrative. ‘The far corner’ is all the reader ‘sees’ of the goal net. Winner’s book shares the confessional tone of Hornby’s, but it works from a broader base. *Brilliant Orange*, he notes in the introduction, is, ‘not so much a book about Dutch football’ as it is a book about his, ‘idea of Dutch football’ (2012 [2000], p. 6). Building on the established norms of the form, the book adopts an innovative investigative hue rather than immerse the reader in personal reflection. Its success signalled a shift in creative non-fiction related to football, which revised reader expectations, and led to a swathe of texts that drew on its treatment of football culture as a subject for investigation. Examples that followed include: Alex Bellos’ *Futebol: The Brazilian Way of Life* (2002); Simon Kuper’s *Football Against the Enemy* (2003); *Calcio: A History of Italian Football* (2006) by John Foot; and Jonathan Wilson’s travelogue, *Behind the Curtain: Football in Eastern Europe* (2006), among others.

Even as they differ, *Fever Pitch* and *Brilliant Orange* both develop a reciprocal relationship with their confessor, a reciprocity that transforms the work from a private act into one shared (Gill, 2004). Where they take unorthodox and idiosyncratic approaches to the game, they also effectively illustrate tensions and divergences in the relationships that creative non-fiction has with football. We see this dynamic in *'78: How a Nation Lost the World Cup* (McColl, 2006), which examines the poor planning and dreadful luck that derailed Scotland’s calamitous participation at the World Cup finals in Argentina in 1978. Author Graham McColl draws on the literary characteristics in the football writing of Hornby and Winner as he probes the circumstances surrounding each of Scotland’s three games in the tournament. The following passage captures a tragic moment from Scotland’s second game, a match they were expected to win easily against an inexperienced Iran. However, Scotland’s only goal in the encounter was the own goal conceded by the Iranian defence amid the ‘clownish comedy routine’ described below (2006). The goal net is not recounted at length but is at least present and functional through the direct reference in the last line – Hejazi is the Iranian goalkeeper:

Hejazi extended his right hand in an attempt to gather the ball but, like a wriggling hen evading a slaughter-hungry farmer, it squeezed free before Eskandarian, still in his mood for fun,



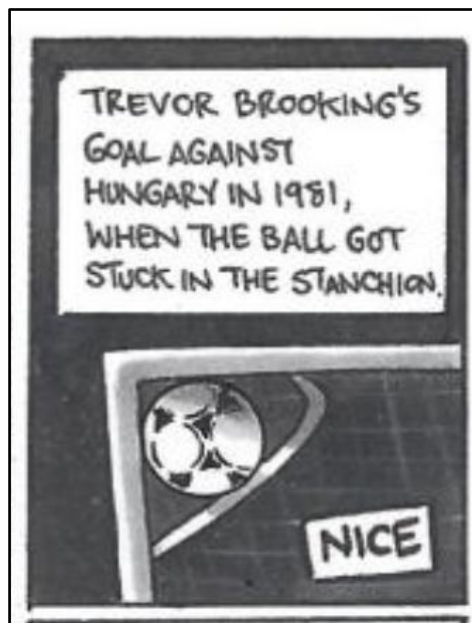
intervened yet again. The ball rolled off his shoulder and, as it bounced, he was ready with his coup de grace; he would cap the laughter by smacking the ball away as quickly as possible in the direction he was facing. Unfortunately for the Iranians, he was facing his own goal. And so, from just behind the penalty spot, Eskandarian planted a graceful, left footed volley right into his own net. (McColl, 2006, p. 163)

Scotland was eliminated from the tournament on goal difference, further salting deep footballing wounds. McColl's humorous recall of the team's profligacy and consequent humiliation allows for a tender, emotive, and careful scrutiny of what has become a tacitly and collectively neglected national trauma.

The scope of this paper does not facilitate extended discussion of identifiable conventions and characteristics associated with creative non-fiction related to football. These examples from Hornby, Winner, and McColl – important, innovative, and critically acclaimed exemplars – should offer a measure of understanding of the key aspects of prominent approaches to the form. Most importantly for this study, they represent the form's common consideration of the goal net. In order to examine the presence of the goal net in the game's culture, and its dramatic influence and central role in the game's main objective – the object within its appropriate context – this paper considers the theoretical frameworks offered by object biography through the lens of a highly illustrative incident.

### Biography of a goal net

In a football match between Hungary and England, played at Budapest's Népstadion in June 1981, England forward, Trevor Brooking, scored a spectacular goal. While not unusual in itself,



**Figure 2. Illustration of Brooking shot conclusion. In *24 Random Nice Things About Football* (Squires, 2020).**

the occasion is marked as extraordinary because the ball, having crossed the goal line, lodged in the small triangular stanchion of the goal net, as depicted in Figure 2. This occurrence was so rare in football that the TV broadcast cut away from customary images of players celebrating to a close-up of the Hungarian goalkeeper punching the ball free from the stanchion.

Brooking's goal and the subsequent camera zoom on the trapped ball foregrounded the Népstadion goal net in a way the object had not previously been considered. The social interaction experienced by the object and by the gloved hands of the goalkeeper charged the goal net with new meaning. A Brooking goal was not rare; the striker was prolific. In that moment, however, the Népstadion goal net was recast from material object to substantive actor, central to one of the game's most notable dramas. A drama so notable, in fact, that it is commonly recalled – most recently, almost 40 years after the event, in a nostalgic newspaper cartoon entitled, *24 Random Nice Things About Football* (Squires, 2020). Witnesses to the goal, broadcast on British television, were given opportunity to consider the goal net anew, at once transformed and transformational, particularly when analysed within the biographical frame.

Igor Kopytoff (1986) conceptualised the notion that objects, such as the Népstadion goal net, could be examined as if they, like humans, have or have had a life story and could therefore be subjected to biographical study that revealed new data about the object. In its momentary interaction with the goalkeeper and the ball, the Népstadion goal net became central to, though neglected by, the game of football. In the instance the goal net 'holds' the ball, it also becomes central to our perception of the game. This centrality connects the goal net, as object, to the communities and societies in which it 'lives' and the ways it can be linked to people and events (Gosden & Marshall, 1999), in this case, the narratives that play out in front of, and include, its position on the pitch.

Understanding the nature of an object's relationship with the human world has made object biography popular within a range of professions, such as archaeology, where the historical approach to objects had previously been represented in 'use-life' theory (see Gosden & Marshall, 1999). Using an example of a stone tool made progressively smaller by repeated sharpenings, Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall re-position the 'use-life' object as an 'inert material to which things happen and are done' (1999, p. 169). They argue that objects are 'active' in providing space and setting for, and are integral to, social interaction (1999). This aligns with the biographical frame's capacity for revelation and assessment of cultural, aesthetic, historical, and political responses to an object, as proposed by Kopytoff (1986). In her biographical analysis of her grandfather's war medal, Jody Joy echoes Gosden and Marshall (1999) and Kopytoff (1986) in suggesting the object's 'inherent meaning' is only created through interaction, particularly where the object's relationship with humans is culturally transformative to the object and the people with whom it interacts (Joy, 2007). However rather than elevate the 'life history' beyond the relational and maintain the object's persistent material form, Joy posits that it is possible to accentuate those periods permitted by archaeological evidence (Joy, 2007). So, the goal net can be considered as 'idle' at times and

at others ‘alive’ within socially interactive relationships, and could, arguably, be considered to have had many lives and many subsequent deaths (Joy, 2007).

The Népstadion, or People’s Stadium, was constructed as Hungary’s national stadium and renamed the Puskás Ferenc Stadion (the Ferenc Puskás Stadium) in its final years in celebration of Hungary’s most famous player. Inaugurated in 1953, it was closed in 2016 and replaced with a new multi-purpose arena. Applying Joy’s analogy, the life of the new arena, stocked with the standardised box-shaped goal net, could be seen to have been conceived in its planning (2015), the initiation of its construction (2017), or its opening (2019).

The Népstadion’s outstanding architectural features were arguably the 16 angled and decorated pillars that ringed the outside of the stadium and supported the staircases that led to its upper tiers, and the four distinctive floodlights – nicknamed the ‘Giraffes’ in acknowledgement of their awkward tilting lean. These features were not commonly captured by television cameras whose primary focus was the field of play, where the goal net is potentially the only significant architectural construct, making it an important visual signifier of the pitch as place. Contextual analysis of both video and stills photography of the first game played in the stadium, a match between Hungarian side Budapest Honvéd FC and Soviet team FC Spartak Moscow (20 August), reveals use of an A-shaped goal net, with a black net hauled over a full-length stanchion. The same goal net had been in use less than a year later when the Hungarian national team delivered a 7-1 thrashing of the English national team (23 May 1954). Analysis of visual records of football matches played at the Népstadion enables some, though inaccurate, tracing of the provenance of the goal net with the small triangular stanchion that played so prominent a role in Brooking’s goal. It is highly likely the goal net was installed at the beginning of season 1979/80, the year before Brooking and his England teammates arrived. The Népstadion goal net’s ‘life’ would span a further twenty years, until season 1998/99 when, in ‘death’, it was replaced by the box-shaped goal net, which had by then become the standard in world football.

In 1981, in being struck by, and in its brief retention of the ball, the Népstadion goal net gained a notable place in football history. Most importantly, for this discussion, it became an object transformed. Brooking’s goal highlights an elite level of expertise, execution, and timing. The goal reflects the highest level of skill at the highest level of international competition. The striker was operating under intense pressure, psychological and physical in nature – the latter applied by the Hungarian opposition. After taking an early lead in the game, England conceded an equaliser late in the first half. The momentum was still with the Hungary team when, after sixty minutes of the match, Brooking scored his goal. These facts and surrounding narrative are typical of action taking place in any competitive international football match. While the game was eventually won 3-1 by England, it is Brooking’s firm and decisive strike into the top corner of the Hungarian goal net that is remembered as turning the match conclusively in England’s favour. The narrative changes, but is, arguably, visually supported by the Népstadion goal net’s resolute reaction to Brooking’s shot. Its action, a symbolic gesture, in holding onto the ball, effectively extended the goal event by a few crucial seconds. The focus of the players of both teams, the camera operator, the crowd in the stadium, and the captive television audience, which would ordinarily have been on the England striker’s shot and celebration, is

shifted to the goal net that has become part of an event within the match, an event Joy would describe as a ‘performative act’ (Joy, 2002, p. 3). The English team utilised the momentary pause to regain their confidence. Simultaneously, the short delay provided a brief though crucial impediment, or at least further subdued, their disappointed opponents who were weighed down by extra seconds offered to reflect on the implications of losing ground.

The Népstadion goal net, no longer passive or inert, is central to a drama that changes the game beyond the score. There arises a tension between the socially constituted goal net’s attitude as the game’s emotional focus and the object’s desultory and imperceptible status in the game. This tension is recognised at the time by ITV commentator Brian Moore, who exclaimed in surprise: ‘Look at the ball, caught up in the corner there’ (1981, 0:20). His statement echoes Baudrillard’s lament that while the subject may make history, the object is ‘shamed, obscene, passive’ (Baudrillard, 1990, p. iii). It would also appear to demonstrate the argument, articulated by Brown, that we merely discern ‘things’ since we ‘look *through* objects’ to discover what they reveal of ‘history, society, nature or culture’ and above all, ourselves (Brown, 2001, p. 4; italics in original). This novel consideration of the now lost Népstadion goal net is, of course, founded in a nostalgia positioned within, what a poet might describe as our human ‘state of unending loss’ (Stamelman, 1990, p. 3). The aluminium and nylon components of the Népstadion goal net plays a significant role in shaping the visual narrative of the goal and the ways England’s victory in the match is remembered and contextualised. The goal net’s prior stationary role is transformed; the object is imbued with narrative; it has a storied ‘life’.

The goal net and other objects crucial to football are ordinarily approached through the lens of sports performance or at least its enhancement within the discipline of sports science, or examined in a linear, historical fashion (Heard, 2018; Stride et al., 2015; Williams, 2014; Inglis, 1996). Examination of the goal net allows a better understanding of the object’s ‘birth’ and ‘death’, including knowledge of its ancestry and significant moments in its life history. Were we to address this narrative with other characteristics common to creative non-fiction related to football, those seconds in which the Népstadion goal net cradled the ball can be extended and expanded upon, through use of conversational narrative style, a confessional introduction and the prominent authorial presence. A more holistic story in this era of football’s conformity and standardisation could ‘restore the lost object in the present moment of a representation’ (Stamelman, 1990, p. 5). The loss of rich diversity and differentiation between shapes and styles of goal net can be seen as the forfeiture of an important visual signifier in the game. Its loss to corporatisation and standardisation can be seen as emblematic of the dramatic changes that have occurred in football’s international culture in the last forty years.

## Conclusion

This paper presents a history of the goal net, an underexplored object essential to the sport of football. It draws on theory and concepts offered by object biography and those practices common to creative non-fiction related to football. Their combination afforded exploration of

the role and presence of the goal net in Trevor's Brooking's goal at the Népstadion, Hungary in 1981. The biographical analysis underlines social interactions experienced by the object, particularly those that charge it with meaning, elevating a single goal and provoking a new or different reading of the game through the prism of the goal net; one worthy of deeper consideration.

This research arguably expands our understanding of creative non-fiction related to football and contributes to the form through the identification of a key characteristic and its use within the subgenre of creative non-fiction. The characteristics and conventions of creative non-fiction related to football have yet to be applied fully in this form, but it is clear that their undertaking would enrich a biographical study of a football object, be it a stadium light, a corner flag or a goal net.

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