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Subverting the inverted pyramid: Kevin McCarra and the revolution in British football journalism 1988-2020

Abstract:
Football sports writing in Britain's quality broadsheet newspapers has undergone a stylistic revolution since the 1990s. Despite being pioneered by colourful individuals in the inter-war period, football writing has usually been relegated to minor partner in the editorial mix of papers like *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and the *Sunday Times*. Writers such as Don Davies, Brian Glanville, and Hugh McIlvanney set a template upon which writing about sport, and football in particular, became recognised as having the same high cultural status as political or arts journalism. Reporting about football moved away from the functional telling of the narrative of a match through the five W's of the inverted pyramid (Who, What, Where, When, and Why), towards a deeper more intellectual analysis of the cultural and social importance of the game. Kevin McCarra, who wrote for *The Guardian* from 2002 until his death in 2020, exemplified the new literary approach to football and helped to inspire its development online. This paper analyses where he sits in the pantheon of modern British football writing and identifies how those he has inspired to carry on the tradition have brought football writing full circle back to the pioneers of the inter-war period.

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Introduction

Kevin McCarra, the respected and some would say revolutionary Scottish football writer, died in October 2020. News of his passing incited, amid the mourning, a celebration of a much-loved writer's work. Acknowledgements of the sadness of his loss from every quarter of the game were invariably balanced with anecdotes and examples of the writer's generosity with his peers, the quality of his work, and his unsurpassed influence on the form. Several journalists observed McCarra's unique writing style, which can be seen in the excerpt below, the opening passage from a short article contextualising English representation in the UEFA Champions League Quarter-Final draw, the world's most lucrative club level football competition:

> At midnight on Wednesday the citizens of Valencia marked the end of the festival of Las Fallas by setting giant effigies alight, but Arsenal's own bonfire of the vanities had already taken place. Even if they are not the monsters of conceit that Sir Alex Ferguson alleges, the Highbury club's estimation of themselves turns out to have been overstated. (McCarra, 2003)

The match noted is Valencia Club de Fútbol's defeat of Arsenal, which took place in Valencia on March 19, 2003. The final throes of Las Fallas festival are paralleled with Arsenal's forlorn, arguably condemned, exit from the competition. The defeat illustrated what McCarra sees as the vainglorious, hubristic, and misguided self-estimation of the Premier League club, who had long believed themselves to be footballing aristocrats but had continually flattered to deceive in the Champions League. Alongside underlining Manchester United's dominance in the English Premier League, and their head coach Sir Alex Ferguson, the paragraph goes some way to foregrounding the writer's gentle lament for the discernible lack of quality and capacity of English football teams when compared with their Latin European counterparts. The writer highlights the often irrational and quixotic self-congratulation of English clubs in a tournament where the sole remaining English side in 2003 competed alongside three Italian teams and three Spanish clubs. McCarra's statement is also highly prophetic: 18 years later, despite having not won a European trophy or the Premiership in the intervening period, Arsenal were among the founders of the ultimately ill-fated European Super League.

On a basic level, journalists, at least in the English-speaking tradition, have tended to work in the so-called "inverted pyramid" model, a method of presenting a summary of the most newsworthy facts of any given story in a hierarchy of prominence (Keeble, 2006). Put simply, the five W's of journalism – who, what, why, where, and when – are summarised in a "lede" or opening paragraphs to give the reader a skeletal understanding of the story early before it becomes more detailed. The writer maintains an "objective" third person, outsider stance of detachment. This method of writing has deep roots in the print production cultures of Britain and America, predating word processing or computer-aided production and has been criticised as being "outdated, unnatural, artless and a factor in declining readership" (Scanlan, 2003). The inverted pyramid is thus formulaic and utilitarian and can lead to the deeper story being missed by both reporter and reader.

McCarra adapts the inverted pyramid and subverts it, moulding it to suit his ultimate purpose, which is to illustrate that the result has a much deeper cultural resonance than merely the 2-1 victory for Valencia. The utilitarian presentation of the outcome of the game becomes subjugated to what McCarra sees as the significance of an English club, brought up on notions of its own sporting superiority, humbled by Spanish opponents given little credit prior to kick-off. McCarra's pursuit of the deeper cultural significance of events beyond the 5 W's is one that borrows from both the American New Journalism tradition of the 1960s and that of a generation of British journalists with literary aspirations, working on newspapers that were gradually giving sport greater prominence in their pages.

At the time of McCarra's death, various journalists, some of them former colleagues, wondered how the difference in his writing might be related to his different personality. Having converted from a career in academia to football writing, his peers nicknamed him "The Brain" (Patullo, 2020) and clearly considered him a breed apart; more football fan, less cynical hack. Stuart Bathgate contended McCarra was a kind fish in an angry sea (Bathgate, as cited in Elder, 2020), while Kevin McKenna cited the curiosity of a football writer "who couldn't kick his own arse and remembered McCarra as a 'prince' of football journalism" (McKenna, 2020). Journalist and close friend, Philippe Auclair, recognised this idiosyncrasy when he wrote McCarra "didn't fit in, yet he did" (Auclair, 2020). Jonathan Wilson hinted at these differences when he illuminated his obituary of McCarra with a curious anecdote about the time McCarra was stuck on a train and could not attend the football match he was assigned, but somehow produced a match report "more memorable than anything written at the match itself" (Wilson, 2020).

Wilson, author of the acclaimed *Behind the Curtain: Football in Eastern Europe* (2006), is among a generation of writers who have remade traditional British journalistic approaches to football coverage, taking it from the utilitarian and tabloid, to the cerebral, literary, and culturally engaged. As we note, there had been infrequent outliers who approached the game in this fashion in previous decades, but, from the 1990s onwards many more writers would come to use this approach. It is no surprise that Wilson saw McCarra as a kindred spirit. Both men demonstrated outsider appeal and emerged in a time where the success of Nick Hornby's era-defining football memoir, *Fever Pitch* (1992), and that of the football fanzine movement, were transforming cultural hinterlands related to football support. Hornby's diarised account of his life as an Arsenal fan brought a previously under-used literary style to reflections on football supporting at a time when fanzines adopted an often ironic, iconoclastic, and cynical approach to the game at odds with the celebratory and jingoistic tone of the mainstream press. McCarra was rarely accused of cynicism, quite the opposite. He frequently displayed a sweeping romantic approach to the game. Being an outsider, his football reporting was heavily influenced by fiction and creative non-fiction in the early 1990s.

This paper therefore seeks to situate McCarra's practice within the historical and contemporary contexts of football writing and define his work as a kind of fulcrum between the older traditions of sports writing and contemporary long-form football journalism which is beginning to find its home on Internet platforms. It employs a contextual review of the work of prominent football writers who elevated the form in different ways; this approach follows the analytical

method adopted by McGowan (2019). The paper examines McCarra's place within the historical development of literary football writing, which arguably begins in the 1930s, with the working man's journalist Don Davies and the individualistic Henry Rose, who developed "insider" relationships with participants in the sports industry and elevated the form to a "crucial and specialised component of popular journalism" (Mason, 1993). To this elevated and "insider" status, Geoffrey Green brought his command of literature and coloured his work in the 1950s with purple prose. The prodigious Brian Glanville contributed works of football fiction to his football journalism to construct an esteemed oeuvre of football writing in the 1960s. Through textual analysis (McKee, 2003; Belsey, 2013), this paper strives to demonstrate how Hugh McIlvanney's educated, working-class background inspired writing that exploited the journalist's "inside" position and, at last, bestowed respect on sports writing. It then considers Kevin McCarra's emergence in the period of fanzine "outsiders" and the ways his work marked a significant shift in the form. The contemporary context will situate McCarra's work within the mainstream elevation of literary football writing that occurred in the early 1990s, with the advent of cultural football phenomena such as "*Fever Pitch*, fanzines and Italian football on Channel 4" (Wilson, 2020). The final section of the paper considers McCarra's own practice and its position in relation to those sports writers he worked beside such as Jonathon Liew who has been outspoken on racial issues, and Amy Lawrence who adopts the "insider" position of Rose, Green, Glanville, and McIlvanney to write for the online platform *The Athletic*.

The literary pioneers of British football journalism

Traditional football writing in Britain during the inter-war years was the preserve of an amateur class writing under pseudonyms such as "Corinthian" churning out thick columns of detailed narrative rendered impenetrable by references to classical texts preferred to basic reportage of the football match (Fishwick, 1989). This dense style came under intense pressure from American sports writing, which, like other cultural exports such as music and film, became fashionable in Britain at this time. Slowly, the long columns of laboured text were broken up by visuals, headings, and shorter sentences. The writing was informal and littered with Americanisms as British football journalists "forsook the prosaic for the imaginative, the human drama and the 'behind the scenes' story" (Hill, 2002, pp. 44-45).

One such writer was "An Old International" posthumously unmasked as Don Davies, lover of classical music and literature, former pilot in the Royal Flying Corps during World War One and, like Kevin McCarra 70 years in the future, Chief Football Correspondent at the (then *Manchester*) *Guardian* (Williams, 2018). Until a year before his death in 1958, Davies was "An Old International" at weekends only; Monday to Friday he was headmaster at the school linked to the Manchester-based engineering giant, Mather and Platt. Football writer David Goldblatt may have had Davies's curious duality in mind when he argued football could no more be removed from the history of the modern world than the history of the modern world could be disconnected from the history of football (Goldblatt, 2006).

Davies was described as a writer "of considerable literary skill who brought to the genre of sports reporting a thoughtful, articulate, and broadly philosophical approach" (Goldlust, as cited in Boyle, 2006, p. 35). His tendency toward the artful digression brought him a sizable readership. His last match report, a report of Manchester United's 3-3 draw with Red Star Belgrade in former Yugoslavia in February 1958 began: "Who would be a weather prophet? At Belgrade today in warm sunshine and on a grass pitch where the last remnants of melting snow produced the effect of an English lawn flecked with daisies" (An Old International, 1958). Davies reported on Manchester United regularly and chronicled the rise of the "Busby Babes", a group of prodigiously talented youth players who graduated to play for United's first team and came to national prominence in the late 1950s. The day after the match in Belgrade, Davies died alongside seven fellow journalists, seven Manchester United staff members and eight of the players, when their plane failed to take off and crashed at Munich-Riem airport. At the memorial service, Davies's eulogy acknowledged his achievements in elevating the game. He was remembered by his *Manchester Guardian* colleague, Neville Cardus, as "something of a poet" (Williams, 2018).

Another "poet", Davies's colleague, John Arlott, wrote Davies's obituary in the *Manchester Guardian*. Arlott had previously written for the London *Evening News*, which would later be named the London *Evening Standard*. A household name for his radio and television commentary, Arlott was described as "the Shakespeare of cricket" for his poetic articulation of the game and its characters (Arlott, 1994, p. 101). He became renowned for his role in exposing South Africa's racist policies, which he considered "detestable" (Arlott, 1970). His actions in supporting black South African cricketer Basil D'Oliveira led to the English Cricket Board, then world sport, boycotting all activities within the apartheid state. Arlott's seat on the doomed Manchester United flight was taken by Davies, which offers some indication of his significant contribution to football writing.

Eight journalists died in what became known as the Munich air disaster. One of the eight journalists who perished in this event was Henry Rose who originally wrote under the pseudonym "Taurus" (Dee, 2014, p. 431). This name was dropped in early 1931, about the same time British sport was emerging from its Corinthian and amateur chrysalis (Bolsmann & Porter, 2018). Rose's subsequent rise to national prominence and celebrity could thus be seen as a symbol of British sport's flight to modernisation and commercialisation. Before the mass consumption of radio and television, the primary source of information in early 1930s Britain was the newspaper. Rose wrote for the *Daily Express*, which, at the time of his death, was the country's most popular newspaper with four million daily sales (Seymour-Ure, 1991). Like Davies, Rose's writing style was short, snappy, and approachable, yet also highly personalised and opinionated, as demonstrated in his report of the annual England versus Scotland international match in 1938:

> Five minutes after I had left the Wembley Stadium I had completely forgotten about the international. It was that sort of match. The worst international I have seen for years, almost ever, for long stretches my notebook lay undisturbed, as were the two goalkeepers. (Rose, as cited in Dee, 2014, p. 16)

Rose's style, which leveraged his reputation for being a "controversialist" (Collins, 2008, p. 27) reflected his readers' own discussions and opinions of football. With his photo inserted at the head of his articles, Rose constructed an identity for himself that so resonated with *Daily Express* readers that he was given his own column. Rose's bi-weekly column soon became a daily feature (Dee, 2014). With access to those within the industry, and a willingness to share his knowledge with his readers, the column established his "insider" status. Another popular aspect of Rose's column was his predilection for prediction, which aligned with the British public's love of betting and coincided with the growth of the football pools, where punters systematically bet on a spread of football matches. Rose's work soon became an essential resource for people playing the pools. He was "effectively as popular as the people whose deeds he described" (Collins, 2008, p. 27), a celebrity, and the *Daily Express* leveraged this connection by placing adverts for pools companies alongside the column (Dee, 2014).

Another "insider" sportswriter and celebrity journalist who seemed to know every European political, entertainment, and sporting figure of the day was Geoffrey Green. A self-styled raconteur from a privileged family background and elite Cambridge University education, Green determined the football journalist should not be exiled to the back pages, that he should be proud of his craft and, 50 years before Pete Davies's ground-breaking coverage of the 1990 FIFA World Cup in *All Played Out, the Full Story of Italia 90* (1990) and Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992), should position the game as high-brow culture. In response to the challenges of a ballerina in a Madrid Club, Green wrote on the merits of his cultural credentials and football's position as art:

> Most of us waste our lives in one way or another; yet in football I see ballet and movement; I hear music and see a stage play … Football for me contains all these elements of art. There is ballet in the movement of the players; music in the roar of the crowd – now fortissimo, now diminuendo. The field is a stage on which a play is acted. But in football you never know the ending. It can be different every time. (Green, 1992, p. 101)

Green acknowledged that his own drive toward literary acceptance saw him reach too far. Wolverhampton Wanderers's defeat of Spartak Moscow in a 1954 friendly inspired a "plethora of purple passages", the kind that would lead satirists to mock the form. However, Green's masterful prose influenced public perception of English football, which is more impressive when one learns that Green, under deadline pressure, sometimes dictated his articles free-form over the phone to editors in London (Green, 1992).

Perhaps the most revered of all British football writers is Brian Glanville who came to national recognition in the 1960s, a decade distinguished by relatively high levels of literary output and enterprise, and its documentation of significant social and political changes, balanced with a depth of knowledge of the game. Glanville's contributions to football writing, including a number of novels and short stories, made him one of the world's most important and most prolific authors.

Glanville is known for a straightforward approach to the non-fiction commentary and reportage he produced on every level of football across six decades. His start as a writer came in 1950, when, aged only 19, he convinced Arsenal icon Cliff Baston he should author his biography, and persuaded his father to pay for its publication. On the back of it, Glanville established a prodigious talent experimenting with, and excelling in, every kind of football writing. This resulted in the production of over 20 works of fiction and 26 non-fiction books related to football – one of which, *The Sunday Times History of the World Cup* (1973), was originally published before the 1974 tournament in West Germany and has been updated every four years. Having attended 12 World Cup tournaments, football's biggest stage could be considered Glanville's specialist subject, his veteran chronicling of which brings a depth of field and breadth of vision rarely seen in football writing. On the eve of the hosts Argentina's match against Brazil in the second round of the 1978 World Cup, Glanville reflected on a visit to the famous Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges when he observed:

> Out at Mar del Plata the sun shines, for once this winter, on the sea and multiplicity of hotels. At the stadium, the field is abominable. It looks as though a regiment of cavalry has been riding on it all morning, As the Brazilian team goes through their muted gyrations, uncharacteristically limp and dull, I think how strange it is that these events on a soggy field in a little stadium, so tedious to the eye, will lead to such furore in Brazil – to anti-carnivals, the burning of effigies, suicide, murder. "I am sure our national honour is not at stake," Borges says. The still, calm voice of calm – what hope has it of being heard? (Glanville, 1978)

Despite the efforts of Davies, Rose, and Glanville, football writers' cultural status continued to remain low in Britain. The poor reputation of sports journalists in general was eventually cast off in 1976 when Hugh McIlvanney became the first, and only, sportswriter to be named Journalist of the Year in Britain. In winning this prestigious award, McIlvanney achieved what Rose, Davies, Green, and Glanville could not – respectability among company beyond his journalistic peers.

McIlvanney was born in Kilmarnock, Scotland, in 1934. He became a reporter in his mid-twenties and is described by fellow journalist and author David Randall as "very probably the best writer ever to apply words to newsprint" (Randall, 2015, p. 179). McIlvanney emerged from the last generation of sports writers that shared the same working-class upbringing as the footballers they were reporting on. He deployed cultured and precise language to produce writing that conveyed understanding of football in a way that had not been done before. Through his skill as a football, horse racing, and boxing writer, McIlvanney found himself attached to prestigious Sunday publications, *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times*. McIlvanney's speciality was to nail the essence of a topic in one line, often with a memorable metaphor (Randall, 2015). Describing England and Ireland playing brutalist football at the 1990 World Cup, he wrote: "Our football made its entrance to the World Cup like someone arriving at a symphony concert on a skateboard with a ghetto-blaster turned up to full volume" (Randall, 2015, p. 182). His much-quoted description of George Best, who he described as having "feet as sensitive as a pick-pocket's hands" (Randall, 2015, p. 187), also revealed the

deep friendships he built with players and managers. In many ways, McIlvanney's early career was defined by the close bonds he built with the Scottish managers Bill Shankly and Jock Stein, men with whom he shared a West of Scotland working class affinity. They were also important influences on McCarra's world view. However, in the wider perspective, McIlvanney brought change in inside-the-box thinking and expanded sports writing through quality reporting – reporting that incorporated aspects of sport beyond the stadium, the running track or the boxing ring. McIlvanney's influence on the Scottish sports journalism scene that McCarra emerged from cannot be over-estimated.

Fanzines, punk, and the disruptive DIY ethic

While McIlvanney helped revolutionise British sports journalism in the late 1970s, punk rock music disrupted the country's musical landscape. Punk fans rejected old top-down models of fan consumption, rejecting the manufactured narratives that developed out of the music industry's symbiotic relationship with the then powerful British music press and tabloid newspapers. While newspapers like the *New Musical Express*, *Melody Maker,* and *Sounds* were important for the development of punk and post punk, increasingly working-class fans, particularly those geographically marginalised from punk's London epicentre, wrote and sold their own self-produced fanzines (Savage, 2005). Their "scissors and glue DIY aesthetic" (Triggs, 2006, p. 74) was an anti-mainstream, outsider statement and would become tremendously influential on the many fans for whom music and football were indivisible central core elements of their cultural and political identity. As punk emerged as a grassroots disruptive force in the music industry, the football fanzine movement became a similarly disruptive and alternative voice to mainstream football journalism.

Haynes (1995) traces English football fanzine production back to, *Foul!,* published in 1972. Adopting a socio-cultural approach to the fanzine, which he postulates is a key tool in recognising the identity and behaviour of football supporters, Haynes (1995) argues the fanzine is a "novel, irreverent gaze upon the world of football contributing to a wider oral tradition of talking about the game" (p. 152). The fanzine became a popular media channel in the 1980s, most notably with the publication of *When Saturday Comes* (*WSC*) in 1986. Its founders were not aware of *Foul!*; instead, their inspiration and model for *WSC* was punk rock music, and fanzines, such as *Sniffing Glue* (Brewster, 1993). The popular progenitor of the modern British football fanzine was positioned as the punk alternative to mainstream football journalism, and a British government that "despised" the game (Kelly, as cited in Johnes, 2004).

The founders of *WSC* considered the mainstream football journalism of the mid-1980s to be patronising and "condescending" to football fans (Brewster, 1993). In the 1930s, as we have seen, journalists like Henry Rose forged connections with the football industry that made for "insider" copy and a revolution in how football was reported. Half a century later those connections had grown to the extent that journalists were suspected of curtailing investigative reporting for fear of losing their "insider" status and sources (Rowe, 2005, p. 133). They were no longer seen to report critically on clubs or the game in general (Brewster, 1993). Punk music

emerged in the mid-1970s as a street-based alternative style to a music scene considered "bloated beyond repair" (Grierson et al., 2021). In the same way, the fanzine of the mid-1980s was the punk alternative to mainstream football journalism – "a type of journalism quite different from that of the professional sports journalist" (Atton, 2007, p. 283). As a magazine written by fans, for fans, *WSC* was positioned outside the football industry and its founders considered themselves "outsiders" (Brewster, 1993, p. 18). They had no more access to clubs and football industry personnel than the ordinary fan on the terraces.

When Saturday Comes started with a print run of one hundred copies. By 1993, the fanzine had a national distribution deal, printing forty thousand copies each month (Brewster, 1993). This new, emerging market for writing about football was demonstrably different in design and intention than mainstream newspaper journalism. *WSC's* success also inspired fans of the game to publish their own fanzines; many focused on the clubs they supported (Millward, 2008) and were made possible by the technological changes of the time including desktop publishing and office photocopying (Haynes, 1995). Club-specific fanzines included *Through the Wind and Rain* for Liverpool FC, *King of the Kippax* for Manchester City FC, and *Not The View* for Celtic FC, the club supported by Kevin McCarra. *Not The View* was published as an alternative news channel to the club's own in-house publication, *The Celtic View,* and was, at the time, like *Through the Wind and Rain* for Liverpool fans, "the only outlet for fans to mouth off" (Kelly, as cited in Millward, 2008, p. 300). *The Celtic View* was considered an uncritical vehicle for Celtic's increasingly unpopular board. It was reputed to publish club propaganda and was nicknamed "Pravda" after the then-Soviet Union's official newspaper (Harper, 2019). *Not The View* published irreverent articles exploring the issues facing Celtic, a club playing in a dilapidated stadium and run by a board lacking both the professionalism to compete in an increasingly commercial environment and the finance to keep up with the spending on players by then bitter rival, Glasgow Rangers FC (the club would be liquidated in February 2012). Contributors to *Not The View*, writing under pseudonyms, such as Ordinary Joe Miller, echoed the football writers of earlier generations by speaking directly to fans about their concerns and their club. They were among the first to alert the wider Celtic support to the financial existential threat that the Rangers's ambition wrought on the club (Carr et al., 2000).

These fanzines offered an alternative voice and platform to football fans vilified by the British government. Their production coincided with English league grounds recording their lowest aggregate attendances for forty years (Gould and Williams, 2011). This reflected what was perceived as the "near terminal decline" of the English game (Gould & Williams, 2011, p. 587), as its political and social landscape changed in a decade blackened by images of football hooliganism. The nadir was reached at the 1985 European Cup final played at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels, when 39 Juventus fans died after terrace violence with Liverpool supporters (Dixon, 2020). Margaret Thatcher's administration responded by shifting state policy "away from consent towards coercion" (Haynes, 1995, p. 46) with heavy policing and draconian legislation (Giulianotti, 2012). Mainstream football journalism of the time reflected the government's opinion of the game and its supporters, with the *Sunday Times* of May 1985 arguing football was a "slum game played by slum people in slum stadiums" (Goldblatt, 2006, p. 542). The fanzine, a "vehicle for subcultural communication" (Triggs, 2006, p. 74),

reflecting supporters' social and political realities, became the medium by which the "slum people" communicated with each other, in great numbers. By 1992, the number of football fanzines in the UK was estimated at over one thousand different publications (Dixon, 2020).

Around this time, *When Saturday Comes* embarked on a fresh, alternative reporting style, by supporting a group of fans to follow the English national team to its World Cup qualifying fixture against Albania, in Albania. The story of the fans' adventure to the most remote corner of Cold War Eastern Europe, included the bus breaking down before it left England and reflected the ordinary, peaceful fans' experience of travelling overseas to watch football. Though *WSC*'s non-violent fans were attacked by a rival, violent group of English neo-Nazis, the trip's premise of promoting fans behaving well, and the fanzine, acted as counter to the mainstream media's narrative of hooliganism (Brewster, 1993). On the eve of the 1990 World Cup in Italy, *WSC*, fanzine culture, and writers such as Kevin McCarra, repositioned dark and decrepitly terraced, though popular perceptions of the game. "In a fog of spliffed-out bliss and to the soundtrack of New Order, English football began its long renaissance" (Hussey, 2005), and Kevin McCarra entered the field of football journalism.

McCarra and his legacy: New long-form journalism and the internet

A "poet in the press box" (Gordon, 2020), McCarra wrote for the new Scottish broadsheet *Scotland on Sunday* and soon became known for bringing literary insight to his reporting (Wilson, 2020). His elevation to the national stage soon followed, with appointments at *The Times* and *Sunday Times* in the mid-1990s. In 2002, *The Guardian,* became, perhaps, the perfect home for a man with liberal left-wing politics and an academic background. McCarra entered journalism after a period in academia where he worked on an unfinished PhD on 15th century Scottish poetry. While his contribution to the football fanzine movement could not be described as prolific, he disrupted the field of poetry as the co-founder of Mariscat Press in Glasgow (Wilson, 2020). His background and relatively late entry into football journalism differentiated him from much of the rest of the press pack. Celtic FC writer, Alex Gordon, asserts McCarra was a "complete one-off" who "really didn't belong in the dog-eat-dog world of newspapers" (Gordon, 2020). Auclair detected "a certain otherworldliness" to McCarra (Auclair, 2020). Like the founders of *When Saturday Comes*, McCarra was an outsider in his industry. This status permitted him, like the writers at *WSC*, a different view of the game he chronicled in "crisp" prose, free of cliché that "demonstrated his prescience and the unusual cadences of his writing" (Wilson, 2020).

While he took an opposing view to McIlvanney's notion of the journalist as privileged insider, he shared with his West of Scotland compatriot talent for a memorable turn of phrase that reflected their class and cultural backgrounds. He had a great stylistic affinity with David Lacey, his predecessor as *Guardian* chief football correspondent. Writing of a Celtic Rangers Glasgow derby clash in 1995, McCarra's lede bore the hallmarks of an upbringing in a city where football and religion were intimately intertwined:

> There is, like it or not, one auld acquaintance that never will be forgot. Even now, when the precise date and kick-off time are shunted around to suit television, the meeting of Celtic and Rangers at New Year still has a special resonance. Perhaps it's only natural that a pagan festival and an unholy match should have so strong an affinity. (McCarra, 1995, as cited in Pattullo, 2020)

McCarra's reflection of Liverpool's "miraculous" comeback in the 2005 Champions League Final was also tinged with his Glaswegian Catholic background:

> The Liverpool fans came to the European Cup final as sore-footed pilgrims, forced by road blocks to trudge at least a couple of miles to the Ataturk Olympic stadium. They were on their way to a trial of faith. With their side 3-0 down to Milan, the eye-witness reports were of occasional sobbing at the interval, and those who sang *You'll Never Walk Alone* cannot have been sure whether they were launching a rallying cry at the Istanbul skies or merely consoling themselves. (McCarra, 2005)

Like McIlvanney, McCarra was perhaps best when he was contextualising the breathtaking achievements of great players, setting them in their context, and allowing the reader to see the hidden story behind them with pinpoint clarity. When discussing Gareth's Bale's international exploits for Wales, he wrote:

> The lottery of the birthplace adds intrigue to international football. Great players can be introduced to humility should they happen to be attached to a country of slender sporting means, but sometimes they create moments of greatness that will live on for decades in the minds of their countrymen. The topic resonated again when Gareth Bale did so much on Friday to ensure that Wales could defeat Scotland 2-1 in their World Cup qualifier. (McCarra, 2012a)

Nor must we think that he was in some shape or form opposed to "mixing it" in the confrontational world of football reporting. Despite previous generations' fear of offending anyone in the game in case it rebounded on them in the future, McCarra was capable of dishing out justifiable criticism where it was required and with more finesse and elan than his tabloid colleagues. His report on the demise of Fabio Capello as England manager was direct and contained a characteristic high cultural reference point for his readers: "The term machiavellian may derive from the 16th century writer and philosopher, but it cannot be assumed that all Italians are masters of intrigue. Fabio Capello, who has resigned as England manager, now looks an innocent abroad" (McCarra, 2012b).

Equally his condemnation of England's failure to qualify for a major competition pulled no punches but was a balanced piece of prose foregrounded by a lede that was not utilitarian in its deployment of the inverted pyramid but set the scene in a more panoramic context, before developing the specific elements of the game:

> Steve McClaren's reign was brief but the ghastliness of it will stay with him forever. The supply of pity has been discontinued and Graham Taylor, the last England manager

> to fall short of a major tournament when the 1994 World Cup was beyond his reach, will look a likeable unfortunate by comparison with the person who presided over a debacle and must be sacked this morning. McClaren went down as the creator of this fiasco rather than its victim as a mediocre Russia beat them to a Euro 2008 berth. (McCarra, 2007)

As the game transformed in the early 2000s and assumed a greater importance in cultural narrative, the literary approach adopted by McCarra in the late 1980s became the accepted style of football reportage in broadsheet newspapers. The erudite yet entertaining literary style with ledes containing high-brow political or cultural references, or long dropped introductions that initially only alluded to the nature of the matches under discussion, became conventional on Fleet Street. McCarra became a generous mentor and adviser for many younger sports writers at the *Guardian* (Nakrani, 2020) and was one of the founding figures of the paper's pioneering and hugely influential *Football Weekly* podcast (Football Weekly, 2020). While he inherited McIlvanney's legacy of uniting the differing demographics of football supporters in their understanding of the modern game, he became a major influence on a new generation of journalists who zeroed in on specific and previously under discussed parts of the game. These were writers like Jonathan Wilson, the first to explore football tactics in depth, and Barney Ronay who, like McCarra, has a peculiar and idiosyncratic style and a gift with metaphor: "It is true there has been a staidness to England selections. Wayne Rooney lingered on like an inherited mahogany sideboard nobody had the heart to leave in the street for the men with lorries" (Ronay, 2021).

This new group of writers joined football's first female writers, some of whom were already well established. With the Internet extending the reach of once-local media channels and broadening fans' horizons, Argentine writer Marcela Mora y Araujo became popular with her reportage of South American football, introducing concepts such as Argentine tactics and the "enganche" (Araujo, 2007). In the UK, two women were prominent in the *Guardian's* stable of football writers. Louise Taylor has been the north-east football correspondent for over twenty years and, before transferring to write for the subscription-based sports website *The Athletic*, Amy Lawrence wrote predominantly about the team she supported, Arsenal. Like that other literary Arsenal fan Nick Hornby, Lawrence writes in a style that reflects the human, everyday appeal of what was once called "The People's Game" (Walvin, 1975), structured in a style that is easy to follow and mirrors the routine of going to the football at Arsenal every second Saturday afternoon. Remembering how Italian Robert Baggio missed the deciding penalty kick in the 1994 World Cup final, Lawrence wrote:

> To this day, everywhere football is played, where a kid playing grassroots ends up bawling that he or she missed the defining penalty in a shootout, adults try to console by reeling off the story of how the greatest player of his time did that at a World Cup final. (Lawrence, 2019)

Together with award-winning sports journalists Daniel Taylor, chief football writer for *The Guardian*, and Oliver Kay, chief football correspondent for *The Times*, Lawrence was poached to write for *The Athletic*. Launched in 2016, its mission was defined by founder Alex Mather

to "replace the sports page in every single city on the continent (USA)" (Biasotti, 2017). Its business plan is based on the premise that sports fans would be happy to pay for in-depth coverage of their sport and favourite team, and they would prefer to consume their sports news in a sports-aggregated platform rather than one that packages sports with news and the weather and the like (Biasotti, 2017).

The Athletic's expansionary growth led to a UK-based site added in May 2019, shortly after which Lawrence was hired. Lawrence still writes mostly about Arsenal and in a reversal of the "outsider" status adopted by Kevin McCarra and *When Saturday Comes* over 30 years before, she is effectively Arsenal correspondent for *The Athletic.* Her readers know, and trust that her in-depth coverage of Arsenal relies on, and is the result of, intimate connections within the club. In this way, Lawrence is a source that Arsenal fans can trust to relate and reflect on the goings-on inside the club, and the latest sports journalist style can be seen to be a return to the once-revolutionary "insider" style made popular by Henry Rose in the 1930s.

Conclusion

Until recently, sports writing was unfavourably regarded as a form and relegated to the back pages of the newspaper. This article employs a contextual review of the work of writers who advanced sports writing to demonstrate how the form became respected and utilises textual analysis to position prominent exponents of sports writing within the context.

Kevin McCarra entered football journalism at a time of great change in the game in the UK. By the mid-1980s, football had reached the depths of its economic and socio-political malaise. The despair in the game was reflected by the national media's condescending coverage of football and antagonised by the British government's belligerent approach to its supporters. The fanzine, written by fans, for fans, assumed an "outsider" position that permitted independent, critical investigation of the game and its clubs became the antonym to the prevailing national narrative. Filled with impertinent and sometimes nonsensical content, the fanzine reflected the socio-political realities of following the game at that time. The success of progenitors, such as *When Saturday Comes,* led to a flood of publications, such as the Celtic-focused *Not The View.* Kevin McCarra entered sports writing at this time. He deployed an innovative literary style and, in the eyes of both his peers and his readers, mirrored the fanzine's "outsider" status. The exploration of the sports writing landscape has informed examination of the ways the work of key practitioners can be compared in a textual analysis of the form. The textual analysis becomes novel where it includes investigation of the roles played by key writers in elevating the form, which provokes a new or different reading of sports writing, one worthy of deeper consideration.

This research arguably expands our understanding of quality sports writing and contributes to the form through the identification of its eminent practitioners and their place within the historical context of football journalism. The paper attempts to introduce a new perspective, one that focuses on the work of Kevin McCarra and the role that he played in transforming

both the way football was reported in newspapers, and the way the game was portrayed in creative non-fiction. The characteristics and conventions of textual analysis have rarely been employed in this manner, but it is clear that their undertaking would enrichen a contextual study of football journalism. The process of doing so also provides the reader with the capacity to differentiate between different sports writing through the filter of its pre-eminent practitioners in the last ninety years.

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