**Too big to love? Manchester United, Local Identity and Mediatised Displacement**

**Guy Hodgson, University of Chester**

In January 2014 two contradictory narratives took place around Manchester United. One underlined the football club’s place in the community; the other was a ritualised response to the club, its roots and the position it holds in the fabric and folklore of the sport and its position in the city of its birth. The former was played out in the local, regional and national media, the latter a result of displacement stemming from a mediatised perception of the club.

The first was a phone call to the police from a distraught local supporter demanding to talk to the club’s erstwhile manager Sir Alex Ferguson in the wake of the club’s defeat in the semi-final of the Capital One Cup, the second was the chant from visiting Tottenham Hotspur fans: “We’ll race you back to London”. They summed up football in the age of commercialisation, the Premier League and Sky money, where financial strength amounts to playing muscle and where football clubs look Janus-like towards their local base and the potential wealth emanating from areas beyond the surrounding community.

The phone incident took place on 22 January 2014 after United were beaten by Sunderland, after which Greater Manchester Police received a 999 call at 22.30 from a drunk man from Crumpsall, a working class district three miles north of the city centre. The man told the call handler: "The result is all wrong, they had extra time and it was a total and utter load of rubbish." After being asked if he needed to report a crime, the caller replied: "Yes, a crime. I want to report a crime. The crime is that Manchester United were absolutely knackered" (BBC, 2014). The man was warned for wasting police time but his distress provided a counterpoint to the common perception of United’s fan base. Here was a man for whom the team represented part of his identity, something that made him Mancunian, a club whose failures reflected upon his self-esteem. He was someone apart from the geographically displaced “plastic” fan, who rival supporters claim attach themselves to the Old Trafford club to claim reflected glory. Hence the Tottenham chant three weeks earlier, echoing a clarion call from the followers of all London clubs who maintain most United supporters are based in the capital.

This chapter will explore United’s place in Manchester in an age of football excess where their most rewarded employee, Wayne Rooney, was paid £300,000 in one week of 2014 (Kay, 2014), what residents in Crumpsall might take a decade to earn. It will examine a football club that was once so ingrained in the local fabric that, in the wake of the 1958 Munich Air Disaster, the Daily Mail journalist Vincent Mulchrone could write: “In the past the heart of the community may have been in the church, or the castle, perhaps the local pub. Today there is no doubt that the heart of this city lies with a football club” (cited in Hodgson, 1977, p. 81). Yet within 50 years, and with the club riding a wave of unprecedented success, those ties with the city had become so stretched that a substantial group of supporters felt the need to form a breakaway club, FC United of Manchester, in 2005. The opening sentence in FC’s manifesto reads: “Our aim is to create a sustainable club for the long term which is owned and democratically run by its members, which is accessible to all the communities of Manchester, and one in which they can participate fully” (FC United, 2014). The fact that FC United’s founders felt the need to insert the words “democratically” and “all the communities of Manchester” could be seen to criticise the financial monolith residing two miles south-west of the city centre and to suggest that the link with the local community had been strained, if not severed.[[1]](#footnote-1) The chapter is also written in the context of the recent success of Manchester City, the rival top-division club, which won the Premiership twice in three years between 2012 and 2014 and which had obvious implications for both clubs in terms of popularity and their places in the identity of the city and the region. It will also include interviews from the chief executive of Manchester United Foundation, the club’s charitable trust that works in the community, and a founder member and spokesman for FC United.

**The Railway Children**

Manchester United’s roots lie in rail. The railways gave workers mobility, the opportunity for football teams to travel, sport enthusiasts the ability to spectate, and, in United’s case, an industrial core from which they were forged. The Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway had its main Manchester depot in the north east of the city and it was after its location, Newton Heath, that the club was named in 1878 (Hart, 1995, p. 120). In 1892 they gained a place in the Football League and must have some local renown because both a future prime minister, A. J. Balfour, and the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* C. P. Scott were listed as vice-presidents (Hodgson, 1977, p. 12). Their prestige could not prevent the club from courting bankruptcy, however, and had it not been for the largesse of local businessmen John H. Davies and Harry Stafford in 1902 the club would have folded and Bury FC, winners of the FA Cup in 1900 and 1903, might be the Twenty-First Century alternative local power to Manchester City. The new owners changed the name to Manchester United, the colours from a white shirt and blue shorts to the present day red and white, and the fortunes of the club to the extent that they were champions six years later.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is difficult to reconcile these impecunious railway children with where United currently stand. In 2014 the club’s website boasted 659 million followers; an average television audience of 47 million per game in 2012/13; and more than two million shirts sold in 2013 (Manchester United, 2014). Financially, this meant the club made a pre-tax profit of £40.5m on record turnover of £433.2m for the year ended 30 June 2014 (Blitz, 2014). Only Real Madrid, Barcelona and Bayern Munich surpassed them globally (Lipton, 2014). A club that nearly folded for the sake of £2,670 in 1902 was taking more than that sum in sales every four minutes 112 years later. Paradoxically, it was Munich that helped propel the club to this stellar financial status. Before 6 February 1958 United, thanks to a policy of fielding youthful footballers under manager Matt Busby, were popular; after the plane crash that claimed the lives of eight players, those feelings were cemented in a generation in Manchester and beyond. Hodgson (1977, p. 81) wrote:

Men were not ashamed to be seen weeping. A black tie was hard to come by. The funerals, day after day it seemed, were almost occasions of state. The daily bulletins from the Munich hospital commanded the attention of war communiqués.

This affection might have lingered had the club not been successful, but first Busby and then Ferguson ended any suggestion of that. In 27 years with the latter as manager, United won 38 trophies including 13 Premier League titles, two Champions Leagues, five FA Cups and four League Cups, the price being that the song “Stand up if you hate Man U” became, according to White and Mitten (2003, p. 379), an “unofficial national anthem”. England supporters sang it at Wembley, even though several United players were in the national team, and in one televised match the then Chelsea chairman Ken Bates was seen rising to his feet to join in. United were not playing in that game (White, 2007). This antipathy was given an extra impetus by events off the pitch, because United’s corporate arm was even stronger than its playing one and the club became a commodity that sucked in finance. Other clubs chased money, to a general distaste of supporters, but United did it better. The generic feeling of abandonment was summed up by a Manchester City fan, Phill Gatenby, who contrasted the treatment he received once the club regained its Premiership status:

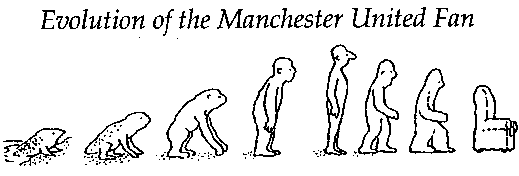
When City were in the old Third Division in 1998-99, the club couldn’t do enough for supporters… and we were told and told and told how much the fans meant… Once back in the promised land, we became surplus to requirements as it was obvious we would simply turn up and be happy to be back at the party again (Porter, 2011, p. 224).

Gatenby tried to establish a City equivalent to FC United in 2005 but did not get the support, suggesting the prevalent view at Eastlands is a disenchantment with the commercialisation of the sport rather than the club itself.[[3]](#footnote-3) The disillusionment with a success-sated Old Trafford is more focussed and has a longer pedigree. Questions were asked about the potential conflict of interest between the football club as a community institution and that as a publicly-listed company when Manchester United floated on the Stock Exchange in 1991. Some supporters, who previously had only an emotional tie to the club, answered by buying shares themselves but the security that expenditure seemed to bring was exposed as flimsy seven years later when Rupert Murdoch’s satellite broadcasting company, BSkyB, launched a takeover bid. The attempt was eventually blocked by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, but not before supporters had rallied to oppose Murdoch via the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA)[[4]](#footnote-4) and the fanzines, *Red Issue* and *United We Stand*.[[5]](#footnote-5) The role of the fanzines was also interesting in that their growth throughout English football in the 1980s was rooted in the marginalisation of football fans. Disenchanted by what they read and saw in the conventional media, supporters published their own magazines where they could challenge perceptions or find a release for their frustrations.

This flexing of supporter muscle might have succeeded in 1999, but was powerless six years later when Malcolm Glazer, an American billionaire who had built a financial empire from a watch-parts business, bought the club for £790m. Glazer never set foot in Old Trafford, but his acquisition of United led to a substantial number of supporters turning away. This was literally so in the case of the founders of FC United, but even the massive majority who found their loyalty to the club too strong joined protests that continued until Glazer’s death in May 2014 (Jackson, 2014). The streets around Old Trafford were peppered with graffiti “Love United, Hate Glazer”, protest marches went round the ground and the club’s megastore and city centre shops run by the club’s sponsors, Nike, Vodafone and Ladbrokes (Porter, 2011) were flash-mobbed. To no avail; the Glazer family still owns Manchester United.

**“You don’t come from Manchester”**

The Tottenham ditty is not an isolated taunt. It is a certainty, carried by football followers who loathe United, that Old Trafford is packed with people from Islington, Dublin, Singapore and just about any place on earth except Manchester. “We support our local team” is another chant that echoes from the visiting corner at United’s ground and, clearly, not all the 659 million supporters claimed by the club website have a Mancunian accent. The capacity at Old Trafford is 75,524 (Manchester United, 2014) meaning the vast majority of the club’s support will never walk down Sir Matt Busby Way, so the website cartoon on an unofficial Manchester City website (City Humour, 2014) is not without foundation:



It should be noted, too, that a survey by YouGov in March 2014 showed that only 49 per cent of British-based City supporters live in the North West of England (Sayers, 2014).

That same survey gave a corresponding figure of only 28 per cent for United, yet nearly a million people lined the streets of Manchester to welcome the Treble-winning team back from Barcelona in 1999 (Byrne, Disley and White, 1999) – not all of them could have taken a Thursday off work to travel from London. Listen to the conversations around the ground on match days and it is clear that most of the speakers are Mancunians, and proud of the fact that a world class sporting institution resides locally. Stereotypically, United’s supporters are represented as being unconnected to the city with a fan base that is more national than local and it is interesting that they, themselves, feel the need to contest this.[[6]](#footnote-6) It seems they are only too aware of the importance of local attachments and belonging to the city, but the mathematics are undeniable; the team is most often loved via a satellite dish and a television set and that rankles with supporters of other clubs. Andy Mitten, of *United We Stand* (cited in White, 1995, p. 178), set out a case for why:

Say you are a fan of Portsmouth, a home-and-away-never-miss-a-game-take-a-bottle-of-banana-milk-in-a-carrier-bag nutter. You go to a match in Birmingham, on a filthy winter Saturday, see your side go down 2-0 in a crap game against West Brom…You get back to the pub about nine in the evening and there’s some bloke at the bar wearing a self-regarding expression and a United shirt.

“What you doing wasting your time with them?” he sneers, rolling a pinch of your sodden Portsmouth away shirt between finger and thumb. “You should get yourself a decent team like me.”

And so, you ask, when was the last time he had done his bit on the terraces… “Don’t actually go to games, do I,” he replied. “Can’t get tickets, can you. They’re too popular a team, see. Not like your lot. But I seen every goal they scored this season on telly.”

Now, would you not hate United, too?

The identity of the Manchester United fan has become such a part of football folklore that several studies have been undertaken. In 2002 Manchester Metropolitan University contributed a paper *Do You Come from Manchester?* as part of a wider study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Wynne and Brown, 2002). It used 2001 season ticket data to determine how many holders resided in the M (Manchester) postal areas. The analysis of more than 44,000 addresses (16,481 City; 27,667 United) revealed that 6,678 (40 per cent) City season ticket holders lived in the “M” postal area and 7,808 (29 per cent) of United supporters. Intriguingly, that result could confirm prejudices in either tribe in that there were more United followers in Manchester but, on a percentage basis, the core City support was more locally based. The report also showed that, geographically, United’s support was drawn mainly from the north and west of Manchester and City’s from the south and east. The full report included the perceptions from both sets of supporters.

Popular stereotypes of the clubs’ fans, ones shared by most City supporters

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Manchester City fans** | **Manchester United fans** |
| Local, northern, Manchester | Southern, global, not Manchester |
| Loyal | Fickle |
| Long standing | New |
| Working Class | Middle class |
| Passionate | Quiet |
| Long suffering | Glory hunter |
| Anti-commercial | Merchandise obsessed |
| ‘Real fans, real club’ | “Pride of Singapore”[[7]](#footnote-7) |

Popular stereotypes of the clubs’ fans, ones shared by most United supporters

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Manchester United fans** | **Manchester City fans** |
| From the city – Manchester | From the “Sticks” - Stockport |
| Success/Serious contenders | Failure/Comedy/Crisis club |
| Big club | Small club |
| Modern | Out of date |
| Realistic, knowledgeable | Deluded (especially prospects) |
| Street-smart/Intelligent | Gullible/Stupid |
| Fashionable/Cosmopolitan | Unfashionable/Parochial |
| Repertoire of Songs/Atmosphere | Few songs/Sullen |
| Large, successful fighting “firm’ | Incompetent/Disorganised “firm” |
| Antagonistic to England | “Little Ingerlander” |

(Wynne and Brown, 2002, pp. 12-13).

This survey was undertaken in 2002 and in the intervening 12 years the takeover of City by Abu Dhabi United Group and two subsequent Premier League titles had a profound effect on the balance of football power in Manchester and on the profile of the club’s support. The YouGov survey referred to earlier in this chapter analysed 8,551 supporters to discover that more British supporters lived outside the North West of England for both clubs. Sayers wrote: “Man U is not a local club… but nor is Man City…. It is a timely reminder that Man City, while basing its identity on being the ‘real’ local team, is also now a major nationwide brand with foreign ownership” (Sayers, 2014). A table, drawn on similar lines to the above reinforced the similarities rather than the differences, while charting the rise of City from former player and owner Francis Lee’s description as the “cock-up club” (Hodgson, 2008) to challengers for the sport’s most important prizes:

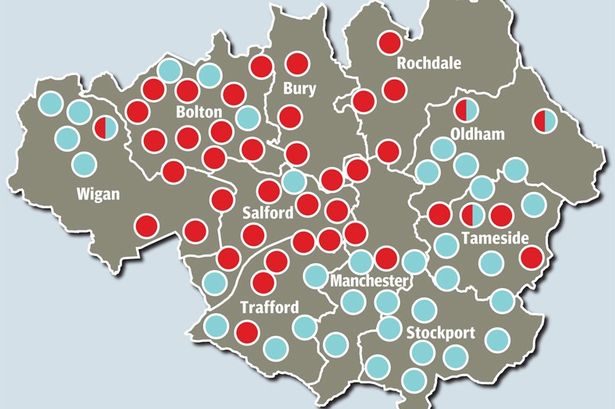
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Manchester United fans**  **describe themselves as:** | **Manchester City fans**  **describe themselves as:** |
| **1** | Adaptable | Big-hearted |
| **2** | Dedicated | Communicative |
| **3** | Confident | Challenging |
| **4** | Friendly | Adaptable |
| **5** | Big-hearted | A leader |
| **6** | Hard-working | Impatient |
| **7** | A leader | Friendly |
| **8** | Trustworthy | Calming |
| **9** | Stubborn | Clever |
| **10** | Easy-going | Independent |

(Sayers, 2014).

YouGov also noted that nine out of 10 pet hates for City supporters were connected to United (Wayne Rooney, David Moyes and Ryan Giggs filling the top three places) while only three out of 10 United supporters felt similarly hostile to City, their pet hatred being directed towards Liverpool and Arsenal (Liverpool former and existing players Kenny Dalglish, Luis Suarez and Steven Gerrard filling their top three).

**Read or Red all over?**

A lot of this antipathy is played out in the media where Manchester United get, what other supporters believe to be, disproportionate attention. In May 2004 United’s takeover by the Glazer family was reported on the front page of *The Times* (O’Connor, 2005) while the same paper announced the purchase of City on page 74 (Ducker, 2008). There were reasons for this beyond United’s brand importance, including that the first reports about the new Abu Dhabi owners were overwhelmed, in terms of sports news values, by the purchase of the Brazilian forward Robinho for £32.4m, and the report figured prominently in the sports section where supporters were more likely to seek news about the club. But it did nothing to assuage people who detect a bias towards Old Trafford. The *Manchester Evening News*, which is institutionally unbiased and has a commercial imperative to provide coverage of both of the city’s teams, is also fascinated by the make-up of the average fan of both clubs. In April 2012 it confirmed the geographical split detected in the by the Economic and Social Research Council a decade earlier, but it was perhaps indicative of how warily the newspaper is of local jealousies that it included the rider “an entirely unscientific exercise, and just for a bit of fun” (Handler, 2012).



(*Manchester Evening News*)

More than a year later it also published more surprising data compiled from Twitter, a social medium once described by Alex Ferguson as “a waste of time” (Keegan, 2014), in which it concluded that a minority of supporters of both clubs were based in the city. Keegan wrote that “the age-old terrace jibe” about United’s fans coming from outside Manchester had a basis of truth, only 6.7 per cent of local people following the club on Twitter, but City’s figure was only slightly higher at 11.5 per cent. More surprisingly given the high profile of the “Cockney Red” in rival perceptions, only 5.2 per cent of United’s fans were from London, compared to 9.9 per cent of City’s. Again, there was the disclaimer: “If Twitter is a worthy barometer”.

**“I Wanna Destroy Glazer and Sky”**

Several academic sources, including Porter (2011) and Poulton (2013), have coupled the formation of FC United of Manchester with a force for democratisation within football and, although the Glazer takeover of Manchester United was its impetus, there were other community-focussed imperatives. “It had been building,” John England, a spokesman for FC United, said. “A number of people had stopped going to Old Trafford because they couldn’t afford it, and they had fallen out of love with the sanitised atmosphere that was creeping in… There was a feeling United were not taking into account the deeply held and sincere views of what the tradition and the culture of that club was. Being typical Mancunians, we wanted to know what was going on at Old Trafford and it was becoming more and more difficult to get any information even in the plc [pre-Glazer] days. There was no rhyme, reason or explanation as to why decision were being made… When the Glazers took United over, that was the catalyst, the straw that broke the camel’s back, the line in the sand, whatever cliché you would like to use, but there were other motives.”

FC United re-located to its new 4,400-capacity ground in Moston in 2015, but, pre-move, it was not difficult to draw a visual analogy between modern commercialism and old or, depending on your view, dated values. FC were based in Ancoats among art studios in grade II-listed Hope Mill, a Nineteenth Century relic from when Manchester was known as Cottonopolis. While Old Trafford announces its presence with a lit “Manchester United” that reflects off the Manchester Ship Canal, there was no neon FC beaming over the Ashton Canal, and, indeed, there was no signage at all (after a 15-minute walk from Piccadilly Station it required directions from two drunks, at 11am, to find the place). From its fifth floor windows, however, it was possible to look down on to the new tram station with a name that would resonate with those who believe Old Trafford is populated with the north London chattering class, New Islington. Ancoats, a name that is significant in newspaper history as the base of the *Daily Express*’sManchester offices, is being erased off the map by new corporate nomenclature. Ancoats, Shudehill, Smithfield and other local areas with their individual history and identity have been incorporated into what developers call, the Northern Quarter – “It’s almost they want to bury the past, they are not proud of it,” England said – although history is a twin-edged sword. While United’s detractors would draw scorn from the linkage to a trendy part of the capital, it is built close to what was the Cardroom Estate, described as the “worst area in Manchester” (Ottewell, 2003). Another *Manchester Evening News* article gave the title its historical provenance, noting that New Islington was an historic mill in the area and the name of a nearby road (Curran, 2004).

England’s affiliation to FC United grew out of disenchantment with the United of the Premier and Champions Leagues. He described his former match-day experience as one of dispersement and displacement. He and his family would meet in a local pub and then, because of the sheer size of Old Trafford and the difficulty in getting tickets, would find that group split around what is now the Sir Alex Ferguson Stand. It left them with differing experiences and an inability to share. “You had a drink together for an hour but you couldn’t enjoy the match together,” he said. “You were experiencing a match from four different angles and there was no common experience apart from what was happening on the pitch. You weren’t able to talk about someone acting like an idiot, or someone getting the crowd together with a new song, it just didn’t work. You were experiencing things in a totally different way. The thread of shared belonging was being lost.

“There has been that strong identity with football in that community for more than 100 years and this is one of the problems that I see with the current model of ownership at the highest levels. Fans, especially the local community, are not taken into account in any decision making so the owners can change the name of the club, Hull City to Hull Tigers, or the colours, Cardiff City from blue to red.” In United and FC’s case the account has closed entirely. England said: “There is no formal or informal link between the two clubs. I think Manchester United took their lead from Alex Ferguson’s school of thought that ‘you are either for us or you are against us and the fact that you still claim to be Manchester United supporters doesn’t wash with us’. So there are no links apart from the fact that most of our fans are also Manchester United fans. I still meet my brother for a pre-match drink but I won’t go in to Old Trafford and I haven’t been in since the Glazers took over. Some families are split over this, so it was quite painful.”

A scene from Ken Loach’s film *Looking for Eric* gave a narrative to the torn loyalties. A group of FC fans leave a pub while Manchester United are being broadcast on a television. For mischief, the United supporters break into a roar of cheers only to mock the FC contingent who race back in to see the “goal”. The message is like that of the Eagles’ *Hotel California*, you can check out of supporting United but you can never leave. It’s something England acknowledges: “We have three groups at FC. There’s people like me who won’t go to Old Trafford even if we were offered a free ticket, and I have on a number of occasions over the years; there are those who will go if they are offered a freebie so they aren’t giving the Glazers any money; and there are those who will go to both. If United are on at 5.30pm on a Saturday we have people who spend the first half with us and beetle off to Old Trafford. Or if United have a lunchtime kick-off they go there and get to us for the second half. We haven’t fallen out among ourselves over that. For everyone it was their own painful decision, and it was wasn’t done with a light heart.”

The formation of FC has also caused mixed reactions from opposing fans who welcomed the newcomers’ entry into the lower leagues and now view them with suspicion three promotions later. On one hand, most appreciated the democratic principles being introduced to the lower leagues, but, like the bigger United, could do without them being so successful and wonder if they are Manchester United-lite with the preoccupation with Old Trafford. The song, to the tune of the Sex Pistols’ *Anarchy in the UK*, frequently hear on the FC terraces – average attendance 2,000 in 2013-14 – espouses the two-eyed focus (FCUnited.RU, 2014):

*I am an FC fan,*  
*I am Mancunian,*  
*I know what I want,*  
*And I know how to get it,*  
*I wanna destroy Glazer and Sky,*  
*Cos I wanna be at FC.*

Being at FC has meant a move to Moston and a £6m stadium since 2015 and its purchase – much of the money was raised by the supporters themselves – brings a sense of finality. “We are totally different from Manchester United and sometimes we regard it as a victory every time the team run out across that white line,” England said. “We are still here after nine years, despite the naysayers saying we wouldn’t last ‘til Christmas”… “For the majority of the people who are with us now, it wouldn’t make a difference on how they would regard United if the Glazers sold up.”

**United in the community**

FC’s commitment to the local community has led them to raise money for disadvantaged youngsters but, while they raise hundreds, the Manchester United Foundation spends millions, £4m to be precise in 2014-15. The foundation’s aims listed on its website (mufoundation.org, 2014) could not contradict more the notion that the Old Trafford monolith has left its neighbours behind. Its goal, it states, is to “educate, motivate and inspire future generations to build better communities for all”. And this aspiration is not for youngsters in Singapore or China but for Salford, Collyhurst and the many challenged areas of the North West of England. “There’s enough charitable work to do around here,” John Shiels, the foundation’s chief executive, said. “Forty per cent of children in Greater Manchester are on or below the poverty line so we don’t need to go far, just five minutes away. Manchester United is a bit of an oasis. Take Old Trafford out and you have an industrial estate and a lot of deprived areas.”

The foundation’s offices are located on the corner of Sir Matt Busby Way and, with an unintentional nod to the club’s roots, Railway Road. Two hundred yards away is the glass-fronted entrance to Old Trafford guarded by a statue of Denis Law, Bobby Charlton and George Best, who were all European footballers of the year in the 1960s. In comparison the foundation’s offices look small but, as Shiels points out, they are two different entities. “We have to be, we are a charity.” From this relatively modest base, United’s foundation goes to at least 70 schools a week with the message of inclusion. “We work in the areas where we are needed and we work there long term,” Shiels, who has been at the foundation since 2008, said, “so it’s not a tick box exercise that says ‘aren’t we great, Manchester United?’ We’ve helped thousands and thousands of kids and it’s not because we are trying to create tomorrow’s fans and get them in the stadium. We’re in the fortunate position where we don’t need to do that.” The main areas they work in – Manchester, Salford, Trafford and Tameside – underline that: they are areas with substantial United support already.

The foundation tries to give young people role models from within their community. “Our idea has evolved,” Shiels, who has worked for the foundation since 1979, said. “We give kids who perhaps don’t get the best of chances an opportunity, a service, a stability, a supportive adult who will help them through choices they have to make… We want to get these youngsters to be contributing adults, not adults who are contributed to, and we think the best way to do that is get them a job. So how can we get them out of the pack, give them a belief in themselves, give them confidence, give them mobility so that when an opportunity for employment comes around they are in a good position? Our thing now is leadership to employability.”

Shiels said the club always served the local community but “it was a case of one day we’ll support this and the next day we wouldn’t”. The formation of the foundation gave this charitable work a more strategic focus. “Yes, we put in funding but we need real partnerships. It’s not a case of us coming in saying ‘we have the answers,’ we need to listen to you… When we are in a place it’s a minimum of three years. In some places we have been there seven years, so we’ve seen little Johnny in class six and now he’s in class 13. We are seeing generations coming through and the idea is make local for local, but give them the aspiration to get out if they wish and see the rest of the world.”

Having international footballers on which to call helps provide inspiration and Shiels believes it is a two-way process in identity in that the sessions ground players who are earning fortunes and, who, in Shiels’ words, are “surrounded by yes”. Mixing them with youngsters who hear “no” on a regular basis is good for their perspective. “The players do help,” he said. “Not as much as we’d like, but Manchester United is a very big commercial organisation and sponsors will take players’ time. When we get them there, however, the players are absolutely brilliant. They love it. Most of the players are from that sort of environment and it does them no harm to get a dose of reality by seeing how the other half are living. I’m sure it makes then better players and better people.

“The irony is that once the kids see the players after five minutes they are bored with them. They just become blokes in a kit. But the massive thing is that it gives our children and their families a bit of kudos. They pump up their chests and say ‘Michael Carrick was in our school today’. When they haven’t much to brag about it gives them something.”

Pointing in the direction of Trafford Park, he added: “We have 55 full-time staff but if were part of the club it would represent four per cent of the staff. There are billion pound companies around here and they don’t do as much as we do, but we don’t do enough, nowhere near enough. People only see the shop window, which is £300,000 a week for a player, but it’s not real. We can never do enough and it can be frustrating if you allow it to be, but I take it down to a level where if we change one life, 10 lives, 100 lives, that’s an achievement.”

In terms of identity Shiels disputes the notion that the city is Sky Blue. He came from Nottingham and stayed in Manchester, his children Mancunians. “It’s only a perception,” he said. “When you look at figures the community is red and blue. Among the older ones its split 50-50, but the young one will go with winners and as United have been successful for 25 years we have more supporters in that age group. If it’s Manchester City’s turn then that will change. There’s no doubt about that.” In terms of football belonging passing down the ages, he added: “I’m not sure the traditional model that you inherit your football allegiance from the grandfather to the dad to the child exists any more. I don’t think kids are as loyal. They are probably a bit more intelligent and sophisticated than we were - we were handed stuff and accepted that it was what the family does. Now communication, technology and the media is so quick and so engaging and so connected with young people it’s very hard for them to accept without question. It’s their right to choose a winning team if they wish. In a world of instant gratification long-termism is not regarded as a necessity as it used to be.”

This inclination to be identified with success has helped United’s worldwide brand but at the risk of becoming so big and so internationally focussed that they are perceived as losing the link with its surroundings. Shiels countered with the work of his charity. “It’s one of the reasons the foundation is so important to the club,” he said. “The local community is not lost.” And had the Glazers’ purchase of the club made a difference? “Not at all,” he answered. “It’s exactly the same. They let the officers manage so I have no adverse comments to say about them at all.” He paused, then added: “That’s probably the first time that name has been mentioned in this office.”

**Conclusion**

While there is a chasm in terms of commercial value the two Uniteds meet over the role of sport in the identity of Manchester. Wynne and Brown noted that the city had used sport to develop the cultural and economic assets in three ways: Olympic bids[[8]](#footnote-8); the Commonwealth Games of 2002; and other international sporting events[[9]](#footnote-9). Sport, they also argued delivered benefits to the community, namely:

* Confidence, self-esteem and empowerment
* Social integration, cohesion and identity
* Reductions in crime
* Enhancement of skills, local pride.

Shiels argues that it is football that has been the real driver. “I would say Manchester politically has built its reputation worldwide on sport,” he said. “Manchester United being one key ingredient, the Commonwealth Games was a massive piece and now Manchester City have raised their profile massively from being mainly a national team into an international team. In terms of what football is to Manchester, they are synonymous really. Alongside music, fashion and, with the BBC moving to Salford Quays, technology and media, we kick over our weight globally. Football is integral to that… Take the two football clubs away from the city and the balloon of Manchester would deflate massively.” England concurred: “Football is a very important of Manchester’s identity. Not only do you have a healthy rivalry between blue and red halves, but there’s great pride in what the clubs achieve. It always helps to have a successful team because it raises the profile of the city, you feel that much better about yourself, your community and the two cities of Manchester and Salford.”

In one sense the question posed by this chapter has a ready answer. If Manchester United is too big to love why does it have a fan base the size of a continent? While many might have a passing flirtation, a significant minority of the 695 million must have stronger feelings and United has had the highest home league attendance figures in England in all but three seasons since 1972-3 (European Football Statistics: 2014).[[10]](#footnote-10) The phone call from the man in Crumpsall was a plea from someone who could feel his pride in Manchester United, his identity, being eroded by mediocre results. Yet the breakaway FC United, while underlining the importance of football to the city, indicates that there are Mancunians who feel that Manchester United is being taken from them. The new owners of Manchester City, meanwhile, are spending millions on facilities for the community near to Eastlands and the Abu Dhabi petro-dollars have purchased success that was inconceivable when the club was lying in the third tier of English football in 1999. The vast majority of City fans have embraced this change in fortune but even there resides a slight discomfort.

“There’s still a strong core of City fans who will have absolutely nothing to do with us because we are red, full stop,” John England of FC United said. “In Moston it’s interesting that a number of people on the doorsteps have been saying ‘I’m a City fan but I support that you are coming into Moston because my kids would love to be involved.’ There’s also an increasing number, albeit not a huge number, who don’t like what’s going on at Eastlands. They can see their club is being taken from them. The old City, whatever they think it was, is being changed and is becoming a clone of Manchester United.”

That perception of a division between the football clubs and their local bases, a bond stretched at the moment rather than broken, would have implications if United and City ever felt they had outgrown the city of their birth. The idea is inconceivable now – and the commitment both clubs show to their local communities reinforces this ­­– but it was similarly so for the post-war Brooklyn Dodgers and in 1958 Walter O’Malley moved the baseball club to Los Angeles. An HBO documentary (Greenburg, 2007) related that the owner was so hated that the tale went that if you asked a Brooklyn fan, confronting the dilemma of a room containing Hitler, Stalin and O’Malley and a gun with two bullets, whom would he shoot? “O’Malley,” was the reply. “Twice.” The fans of City or United in the future might not need to race back to London; the franchise might have got there before them. And connections to Crumpsall will be a memory, much as the names Newton Heath and Ardwick have been consigned to football history.[[11]](#footnote-11)

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1. Partly this is down to cost. The cheapest adult seat price for a Premier League match at Old Traford in the 2014/15 season was £31 (including a £5 discount for official club members, who paid £32 per annum for that privilege). The admission price for FC United was £8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Newton Heath began in green and gold shirts before changing to white in 1896. Copies of the former were worn by opponents of the Glazer takeover as acts of rebellion after 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The fanzine *City ‘Til I Cry* carried the sub-headlines “Hate football, love City” and “Manc attitude, Manc club” at this time. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. IMUSA had been formed in 1995 to tackle various fans’ issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Red Issue* was launched in February 1989, *United We Stand* in autumn 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A popular supporter song has the lyric “We hate the Cockneys, the Scousers, of course (and Leeds). We are United, without any doubt, we are the Manchester boys.”

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Pride of Singapore” was a message on a banner trailed by a plane that City fans commissioned to fly over Old Trafford in 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Manchester bid for the 1996 and 2000 Games. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. World Cycling Championships (1996), World Table Tennis Championships (1997) etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Liverpool is the only club to surpass Manchester United. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Manchester City was founded as St Mark’s (West Gorton) in 1880, became Ardwick in 1887 and assumed its current name in 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)