

Manchester City Fans By Dr Gary James

So much has been written about Manchester City fans over the last few months, much of it hyperbolic, and so I have decided to put a few of my own thoughts down to, hopefully, help balance the situation a little. Before I start I would like to make it absolutely clear that I know that no one fan can represent the entire fanbase – that is definitely not my intention. These are my views which, I hope, some will read and, maybe, some will think ‘yes, that sounds about right’. That’s it. I would urge other fans to do the same. Let those saying ‘Manchester City fans are...’ or ‘City fans want...’ know what you actually feel about your club.

Firstly, it is worth pointing out that many articles/media pieces by journalists who are paid (let’s remember this – they are paid to write these pieces while fans pay to support their team) are stereotyping fans and that is not good at all. City fans are diverse – we come in many shapes, sizes, ethnicities, religions etc. There are young, old, male, female, transgender, gay, straight etc. Left-wing, right-wing, no-wing etc. You name it, City fans are it. Some City fans have been flying in from Scandinavia for 50 years; some live a few doors from the Etihad; some City fans remember the successes of the 1930s; others are too young to remember anything before the Fourmidables.... We cannot be stereotyped. Years ago *King of the Kippax* editor Dave Wallace was elected City’s fan on the board – he soon discovered it was a difficult and thankless task as no individual can truly represent the entire fan base as we are so diverse. In fact the only thing we all share is our love of City – and even that varies. So, if you are writing or talking about the club and describing what City fans are then please remember it is only ever a subset of our fanbase. Everyone likes to think a club’s support is always united (er, sorry, together... you know what I mean!), but we’re not. We all see a different version of a game in our minds and memories; we all have a different view as to what the football club is/was/should be. So for these reasons no one should ever say ‘Manchester City fans are...’.

Over the last couple of years City fans have been bombarded with criticism with some journalists claiming that ‘Manchester City fans are...’ something or other. The latest being that success has made us unhappy and that we pine for the old days in the third tier. What rubbish! It seems it has been open season for some time now and City fans have had to resort to social media posts, forums, writing to *King of the Kippax* or the *Manchester Evening News* in the hope that someone somewhere will listen or support them. They’ve been accused of not attending football matches; not existing before 2008; supporting human rights abuses; defending the club at all costs; bias and much more. I personally cannot remember a time when the fans of any club have received so much negativity from such a wide volume of media and other fans. I remember well the days when fans of English clubs rampaged through Europe and were condemned by many, but this is different. As far as I’m aware, as a body, Manchester City fans have not committed a crime. They have merely supported a football club.

The latest idea that City fans would prefer to be struggling in the third tier is absolute nonsense. Of course many fans do miss the up-against-it camaraderie of those days, in the same way as my grandad’s generation used to talk about the Blitz spirit, but would anyone actually want to go back there? Of course not. I doubt my grandad’s generation would ever

have wanted a world war to break out simply so they could share an air raid shelter with their neighbours and sing “we’ll meet again” down there once more. Likewise, I would never want City to drop down the divisions so that I can once again enjoy trips to new grounds or to chant ‘Swales Out’ while Helen Turner rings her bell as we demonstrate on the forecourt. The past is the past and in conversation we may often look upon it with rose-tinted spectacles remembering the positives but I’m not aware of anyone who would actually enjoy the Hell we were enduring back then. But, as I said earlier, City fans can’t be stereotyped, so maybe some would want that Hell? If I was a journalist working on a national and that was the story I was intending to write I’d at least contact a few Blues and ask for their opinion and whether I could quote them, but that’s not what happened last week it seems.

It’s odd isn’t it that a club whose fans have celebrated every League title success with a pitch invasion (sometimes multiple ones!), apart from the latest (simply because it was at a ground where security prevented it), and demonstrated real passion every time we win a trophy is now being told its fans aren’t bothered about success and that we may never have been really happy since Agueroooooooo in 2012? I don’t know about all City fans but I was absolutely delighted when we beat Chelsea at Villa Park in the Community Shield in our very next competitive game after Agueroooooooo’s main moment – and that was ‘only’ the Community Shield (I say ‘only’ because of how that trophy is downplayed these days by many, but for us fans it was significant.). I’ve been delighted with every success since – and frustrated when our ambitions are thwarted too!

City fans in general were loved by the media when we were a struggling club in the 80s and then in the 90s when we reached our lowest point. They loved our loyalty and humour. It would be nice if those criticising us now would actually come and talk and recognise that, in our souls and hearts, we are still those same people. Many of us have been coming to City for decades – win, lose, draw, abandoned, postponed – and, as with fans of every club, we all have our own particular heroes and memories, but that doesn’t mean we’d prefer to live in that place.

For anyone thinking we loved those days when we struggled here’s a few reminders of what we endured (I say endured because we didn’t enjoy it but I recognise that what we experienced is what fans at the majority of clubs experience; I’m not trying to say ‘we had it worse’ or anything like that, I’m merely trying to remind those suggesting we would prefer to be in that place what that place was actually like):

- Our supporters’ club split as fans argued amongst themselves over the direction of the club (it took years and significant effort by many people to bring it back together).
- Our fanzines were often at loggerheads with each other as each segment of support tried to get its voice heard.
- We had demonstrations against our owners after many, many, many games, including the regular post-match forecourt demos, candlelight protests, sit-down protests on the Kippax etc.
- We had managers who hadn’t a clue and one who put pressure on players to time waste during a game when we desperately needed a goal to ensure survival – then blamed a fan in the crowd for giving him the wrong message!

- We saw some of the worst football imaginable and signed some players who seemed more content with sitting in the reserves or on the bench than playing.
- We saw our club go from a major, profitable power, challenging for trophies, beating major European teams in European competition to one that according to the great Billy McNeill, once our manager, 'couldn't even buy a fish supper!' The debts mysteriously increased despite us remaining one of the best supported teams.
- Failure became expected and we turned up at games hoping, as all fans hope, that something positive would happen but more often than not it didn't.
- There were ridiculously high fences (2.4m) at our grounds. We had a celebratory pitch invasion once (for winning the northern semi-final of the Full Members Cup putting us into the northern final – yes that's how desperate we were for success that we celebrated winning through to a northern final: we did get through to the actual final too of course!) and because of that celebratory pitch invasion our chairman threatened to increase the height of the fences to 4.8 metres!
- We had our stadium downsized with a ridiculously constructed sponsored stand.
- We had a manager sacked for having 'no repartee'. That's the club we had in the 80s and 90s!

Of course, as fans we did what football didn't expect us to do at times and we introduced the inflatable craze. Our club was in debt and our football was struggling, but we tried to have a laugh and it wasn't all bad. We had some great moments, popular players and committed management and directors at times. Men like John Wardle, Chris Bird, David Bernstein, Dennis Tueart, Joe Royle, Kevin Keegan etc. stopped our club from dying and then helped it survive, but the football world had changed and our club was unable to challenge its traditional rivals in the way we had pre-1983 (though no one should ever overlook how close we were to being successful in the early 1990s, before the money available propelled clubs like United – who had borrowed heavily to fund Ferguson's first trophy winning team - and Arsenal forward). Those people helped us on our journey but would anyone genuinely want to go back and suffer?

One of the criticisms City fans have had levelled at them is their seemingly new support, which has led to rival fans chanting the old 'Where Were You When You Were S**t' chant – anyone experiencing City in the 80s or 90s will know how ridiculous that is. The view has been expressed on the radio and inevitably even the Aston Villa fans were singing this in the streets and shopping centre around Wembley. Presumably, none of them are aware of the 1982-83 season. That was City's worst for 18 years and ended in relegation to the second tier. In this depressing season the Blues attracted 26,789 (4th highest in the League) while Villa attracted 23,748 (7th highest). Not bad I suppose but worth remembering that Villa were reigning European Champions that season! I'm not saying this to criticise Villa but merely to point out that the modern criticism of City's supporter history is simply unfair and inaccurate. There are plenty of other figures that could be quoted whenever anyone on radio brings up this ridiculous 'where were you' idea, such as that City have never been the worst supported team in their division (unlike MUFC & Arsenal for example) and that they hold many attendance records. For example, City's highest all-time crowd is over 22,000 higher than LFC's and City's record league crowd is also more than 20,000 higher than LFC's highest league crowd. It is also worth noting that in 1910-11 City topped the League average attendance chart for the first time. That was 46 years before MUFC did it for the first time and LFC didn't manage the

feat until 1923 – in a decade that saw City top the attendances charts as a Division 2 side (LFC were in Division 1 and got 29,975, the 6th best in league; City got 37,468 in the Second). Yet, it's City that has 'no history'. That reminds me – City won a major European trophy in 1970, again before LFC, Juventus, Barcelona et al had won a UEFA organised tournament.

Of course, it's not just City's supporter history that gets criticised, it's their current level of support. A few years back we had the ridiculous situation of a journalist circling empty seats in red with what seemed to be Paint software. It later turned out the photo was taken while fans were still moving to/from their seats for half-time, but it was put across as a genuine image from a key part of the game and used as evidence that fans weren't bothered. Of course, every club has good attendances and bad but overall throughout the Premier League era the club's support has been significant. In fact since 2003 more people have paid to watch MCFC's league games than all clubs except Newcastle, Arsenal and United. Taking all league games during that period City have an average attendance that is almost 2,000 higher than LFC. Not bad considering that City didn't win a single major trophy between 1976 and 2011 (hats off to NUFC for their support too!). As for Europe, City's still at a different stage of development to LFC and MUFC. If you actually compare our European support to what they enjoyed at a similar stage of development then I think City's holds up exceptionally well considering we've a smaller fanbase and share our conurbation with the country's biggest club (have a look at LFC's crowd v Monaco in 2004-05 the season they won the CL or MUFC's crowd for Gary Neville's debut – people can highlight any individual game for any club if they choose to.).

It is worth remembering that City have a close neighbour who has found major success regularly since World War Two. No other team in England shares its conurbation with the country's most popular club and the team that has won more trophies than any other club over the last 30 years. In fact, City also have LFC within 35 miles of their home – the two most decorated clubs in English history. To achieve the average support City have when you consider the successes City's neighbours have had at a time when the Blues plunged to their lowest ever level is astounding. Inevitably, during the 1990s as United won seemingly everything and City reached their lowest ever point (it was a time when MUFC finally overtook City's tally of games in the top flight), support for City was challenged. While Maine Road was a sell-out (other than the increased level of segregation/away allocations) despite the club investing in various temporary seated stands, including the infamous Gene Kelly, it was difficult for younger supporters to follow the club. Getting tickets was often difficult and, with United enjoying their greatest era, it was inevitable that those unable or uninterested in attending games at Maine Road would head towards a trophy-laden and capacity expanding Old Trafford. I think it's important to recognise that the impact of that period has been seen in more recent times when midweek games have been more difficult to sell. The generation who would have been finding their football allegiance in the late 1990s would now be the generation bringing their own kids in 2020. Losing that generation does mean that we can't yet sell out any old fixture on a Wednesday night, but the next generation seem to be choosing City and so that issue may not be with us for much longer.

The journalist Matthew Syed (7 November 2018, The Times) typified the style of reporting by those critical of the club's fans when he described City fans as 'vicious rats' saying that they are: 'so blinded by loyalty that they have lost sight of morality.' Much worse has been said by

media figures on social media and in their own articles. When challenged to discuss his views in a controlled public debate Syed had 'an hectic schedule', adding to fans' frustrations that they were being targeted but not listened to. The main issue for Syed seemed to be that fans continued to support a team that had received investment from the UAE. This has become a far too popular criticism of the club's fans with lots of discussion about human rights issues and so on. Regardless of whether there are human rights abuses or not in the UAE, investment from UAE individuals and companies goes into many businesses around the globe. Indeed Arsenal Football Club have been receiving transformational investment from the UAE for longer than MCFC have, so if it's wrong for City fans to continue to support City then surely the same is true for Arsenal? Arsenal fan Piers Morgan has been outspoken, suggesting City fans should boycott games, but went quiet when it was pointed out his club seemed happy to receive income from the UAE. Morgan has, as far as I know, never urged Arsenal fans to boycott because of human rights issues.

Even the FA has been receiving major income from the UAE and every club that competes in the FA Cup is doing so in the knowledge that the competition is sponsored by a major UAE business. It seems blindingly obvious that football fans have no choice over who sponsors the FA Cup or invests in the FA, just like City fans have no say over who owns Manchester City. We're fans, not negotiators. Often when these things are pointed out, those criticising City fans say 'yes, but the investment you receive dwarfs that received by us' – which immediately proves it's not about human rights at all but about the amount of money received, even though some who support teams that receive money directly or indirectly from countries where there may be human rights' concerns continue to claim it's about human rights. If it is viewed by some in the football world that investment from the UAE is wrong because of human rights issues then clearly they must believe it is wrong for ALL clubs, regardless of how much is received. Whether it's a penny or a billion pounds, if it's wrong to receive income from the UAE then it's wrong no matter how much you get. No one in world football or in UK/European Government has said it's wrong anyway, so therefore the criticism fans get for supporting a team that does receive money from the UAE is also unfair. If you abuse City fans because of where the money comes from then you must abuse all who receive income from the same sources.

Fans have become weary of having to defend something they have no control over and when they challenge journalists who either have worked for people/companies with similar perceived issues they are told it's 'whataboutery' or that it's irrelevant. But, to those being criticised it is relevant. If someone is telling fans they should be ashamed, or boycott their club or whatever then, understandably, fans will say 'but you're actually being paid by' whoever that may be.

Fans pay a fortune (and yes it is their choice) to support their clubs, dedicating many, many hours each week to their support. They take time off work to attend hastily arranged games, some moved for the media (and then some in the media criticise if it's 'only' a 40,000 crowd), and they want to support their team. They respect their rivals (many City fans have been talking this weekend about the incredible support Sunderland gave in a previous League Cup success at Wembley for City) and they want to enjoy their football, but they're being bombarded with negativity by people, often, who are paid to watch games.

I could go on but what MCFC fans do/say/don't do etc. is not something any of us should have to defend. Football fans are the same at every club and are never to blame for what a footballer does, what a club employee does, or what an owner does. As I said earlier, we are diverse with many differing opinions. We shouldn't be stereotyped, just like journalists shouldn't be either. There are some excellent journalists who I trust and who I am happy to help, so I would urge fans not to stereotype them either. But, as with the hounding of celebrities, it seems that some journalists who are paid to write articles prefer to act like trolls to wind up and abuse fans. That's not acceptable. Some of these have received abuse from fans and that is not acceptable either. We should respect each other.

Thanks,

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