

## The Religion of Football:

In the 2008/09 season more than 13.5 Million people visited a premier league match and countless more watched those that are shown on television. Of course, this isn't a count of individuals. It's a total number of visitors.

In comparison, 72% of the nation told the national census in 2001, that they were Christian, that's a total of just over 42 million people but approximately, 7% of the nation attend church regularly. That's an approximate 4 million or so regular churchgoers.

Now, it's important to remind everyone that the initial numbers are only relevant for the Premier league. A lot of people attend the lower leagues of English football still. With the championship attendance average of approximately 18,000 during the 2008/09 season.

Countless more play football on the weekends, there are dozens of Sunday leagues within each regional FA district. There are countless leagues that have no official connection. There are also a significant number of leagues registered as a part of the National League System. Each of these leagues do actually eventually lead to the premier league. There are approximately 12 leagues separating the very bottom of the football league to the national conference league then a further four to the championship. Just imagine the sheer number of teams in all of those leagues. The majority of which receive no financial recompense for their efforts. These matches continue in rain, wind, cold and occasionally snow. Unless the ground is unfit, the match continues, there are usually more than 15 players for each team. All of who feature for teams that aren't even recognised by opposition teams in the same division.

In addition to the regulation 11-a-side there are hundreds of 5,6 and 7-a-side leagues and competitions, all of which are increasing in popularity. These matches take place throughout the year and in all sorts of weather. What is the reason for this? It's simple; people love the game that much.

I love the game that much. In the last 4 years, I've played precisely two full-length matches and they were for a work team against a team from a different store. We played precisely two matches, one home and one away. Of those two matches, we lost both. In the first match we lost 2-4 and in the second we threw away a 4-goal lead at half time in order to draw 4-4. Despite these losses, we pressed ahead with a view to create a team to enter the national league. This failed twice. However, in the meantime, we played 6-a-side football. We played around 50 matches over the course of two years (30min games) we won a total of 3 games. Yet we still go back. It's insane; we've never been comfortable playing in this way, yet we still go back. We still lose. We still play, rain, shine, wind or snow; we were there every week. With a few injuries to key players we were forced to skip a couple of seasons, but we are eager to start playing again.

Why? We've never truly played well; we never won more than a game in a single season. So why do we want to go back? It's actually quite simple. Those in the

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team are my friends; I don't see them nearly as often as I should otherwise. Yet for an hour a week, we're back to playing together, we laugh and joke and play football. Of course, the fact we're playing against another team is irrelevant and truly, it wouldn't matter if they weren't there. The other aspect of playing football is the fitness side. People play football to improve their fitness. During the average premier league game, a central defender covers the least amount of ground of the outfield players. Those lazy defenders barely move with approximately 9.8km covered over the course of 90 minutes. Some central midfielders have covered upwards of 18km during a match. The average distance is less, at 11.4km or so. Of course, this isn't surprising for the midfielders, and in fact has changed little over the last decade or so. What has changed is the speed at which they run their distance. Almost half of the distance is covered at sprinting speeds. So reduce the competitiveness and fitness levels down a bit and you can see why playing football could be a fantastic fat-burning activity.

So far, I've only covered those who play football; there is however, a whole other side to the fandom. Those who just watch the games: There exist three levels of supporters. Those who have a season ticket and attend every home game without fail. Those who attend the odd match, here or there. Finally we have those who watch football solely on the telly.

All of these fans have an opinion of why the manager has gone about something wrongly and aren't afraid of making themselves look like a fool. It's all about the current moment for the majority. When their team is on the telly; they yell, roar, scream and damn near sob along with their teams fortunes. Then the next day there are arguments and gloating between fans of competing teams.

I once attended a league cup first leg between Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur at the Emirates Stadium. I was there with my brother and two cousins. As we came out there was a line of police separating the Arsenal and Spurs supporters up until the north southern bridge. You could see and hear that each group were hurling insults as they walked along the separated path. As we neared the bridge, suddenly the line of police stopped and the two sets of supporters were amongst each other. The same people who were yelling at each other were now talking completely politely saying how spurs were lucky to be headed into the second leg at only 1-1 and then the spurs fan adding that although Walcott had scored a fantastic goal, it was still very close. The next leg was at white hart lane and it'd be their match.

As it turns out, it was, their full team brushed Arsenal's youthful team aside, and whilst nothing happened, it was about as close to anything I'd actually experienced. Then this year in the carling cup second round, there was a massive incident between the fans of West Ham and Millwall. How can people honestly, go out to a football game with the intention of starting fights? Personally, I've had a few scuffles with opposition players whilst on the pitch but once the final whistle blows, you shake their hand and thank them for the game none the less. Amongst the lower echelons of the football world, it's important to

remember, nobody comes to a match with the intention of fighting, it's just not important enough.

But to attend a match with the express intent to start a fight with a rival firm is just stupidity. Surely, football isn't that important to people. It just isn't. Unless you have some stake in the game, surely you can't get so animated when the ref gives a penalty against your team.

As an Arsenal fan, yes, I can say it's not the best thing for a penalty to be given against them, but it doesn't really affect me at the end of the game. Provided I've not placed any sort of wager on the outcome, I honestly don't care. It's nice if they win, it'd be nicer if the team I played for won the next time we play. Then to come into work and face abuse because of what team I support just isn't right. If I could point out, I honestly don't care what team you support, it's not important to me. My closest friends support all sorts of teams: One Arsenal, one Chelsea, one Juventus, one united fan, one spurs, one Liverpool and one Villa Fan.

Team sports surely should be promoting unity rather than dividing the nation. It's a talking point especially when any particular game gets as much attention. It happens with the ashes when England has played particularly well. Cricket suddenly becomes the biggest talking point around. Children play cricket in the park rather than football. When England won the rugby world cup everyone was wearing England rugby shirts and when Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea, suddenly there were a lot more Chelsea fans around.

But I digress, tell a fan of the 'top four' clubs that the team they support sucks and deserve to be relegated from the Premier League and sit back and marvel at the way they will argue why their club is best.

"Thomas... It's up for grabs now - Thomas, right at the end"

Commentator on Michael Thomas' goal deep into injury time during the final match of the 1988-89 season to win the League championship for Arsenal