

The Beautiful Game

By Dónal Thompson



Bill Shankley - A Legend

"Football is not a matter of life and death. It is far more important than that," said the legendary Bill Shankley, manager of Liverpool FC in the 1960's. When I was a kid growing up in the industrial city of Stoke-on-Trent, my local football team was [Port Vale](#). They were rubbish. The stadium had no roof and you had to stand while it rained into your cup of weak tea. The field was a mudbath and every year Port Vale struggled to stay in the Fourth Division. It was magic.

The greatest misunderstanding of all time is that football is a business. Compared to this the Japanese Imperial army's misunderstanding of American intentions just before Hiroshima pales into insignificance. Football is not business. It never was. Football is a working class sport. The reason why the Spanish Football League is facing the biggest crisis in its history is because businessmen think you can buy glory and passion. You can't. You can only sell its imitation. Look at Hollywood.

Go to the cinema time and time again and Terminator will always be back, Harry Potter will always beat Voldemort and Julie Andrews will still be running down the Alps into the arms of Captain Von Trapp. That's fine. But it's not 'footy'.

Manchester United's stadium is called 'the theatre of dreams'. Athletic Bilbao play in 'the cathedral'.

When did you last speak of your local cinema in those terms? Be honest.

When you go to your local football stadium, you don't know what will happen. Football history is littered with fallen Goliaths and daring Davids. There are characters like Jesus Gil (everyone's favourite gangster), Javier Clemente (as snappy as a crocodile) and Bernd Krauss (a gentleman). There is poignancy.

Dennis Law was a Manchester United legend. In the twilight of his career he played for Manchester City. In his last game he scored the goal that put Manchester United into the second division in 1969. He refused to celebrate the goal. He walked silently, head bowed back to his position. There is nobility.

A few years ago in the English League the referee awarded a penalty against Liverpool. The Arsenal player who fell in the penalty area ran to the referee and admitted he had not been fouled! The referee insisted he take the penalty. He did. He missed deliberately.

Look at the final of the Spanish Football League this season. As I write this Real Madrid are in crisis. All that money, that immense quantity of economic muscle has not (yet) been able to conquer the human values of spirit, courage and solidarity. But Real Sociedad is a football team.

I support Real Sociedad and if we stay in the first division I will still think we have been successful. I have shared the games with fellow 'txuri-urdins'. I have enjoyed the ride.

But for Real Madrid to come second will be a failure. Why?

Because it's bad for business. Nihat is a hero. Ronaldo is an asset. Football belongs to working class people and when the European Football Leagues shatter (as they will in the next ten years), football will go back to the true owners of the beautiful game. Men and women like you and me.

"The socialism I believe in is everyone working for each other, everyone having a share in the rewards. It's the way I see the game, the way I see life." - Bill Shankley