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Fever Pitch

Nick Hornby

I have learned things from the game. Much of my knowledge of locations in Britain and Europe comes not from school, but from away games or the sports pages, and hooliganism has given me both a taste for sociology and a degree of fieldwork experience. I have learned the value of investing time and emotion in things I cannot control, and of belonging to a community whose aspirations I share completely and uncritically. And on my first visit to Selhurst Park with my friend Frog, I saw a dead body, still my first, and learned a little bit about, well, life itself.

As we walked towards the railway station after the game, we saw the man lying in the road, partially covered by a raincoat, a purple-and-blue Palace scarf around his neck. Another younger man was crouched over him, and the two of us crossed the road and went to have a look. 'Is he all right?' Frog asked. The man shook his head. 'No. Dead. I was just walking behind him and he keeled over.' He looked dead. He was grey and, as far as we were concerned, unimaginably motionless. We were impressed. Frog sensed a story that would interest not only the fourth year but much of the fifth as well. 'Who done him? Scousers?'

At this point the man lost patience. 'No. He's had a heart attack, you little prats. Now fuck off.' And we did, and that was the end of the incident. But it has never been very far away from me since then, my one and only image of death; it is an image which instructs. The Palace scarf, a banal and homely detail; the timing (after the game, but mid-season), the stranger paying distressed but ultimately detached attention. And, of course, the two idiotic teenagers gawping at a tiny tragedy with unembarrassed fascination, even glee.

It worries me, the prospect of dying in mid-season like that, but of course, in all probability I will die sometime between August and May. We have the naive expectation that when we go, we won't be leaving any loose ends lying around: we will have made our peace with our children, left them happy and stable, and we will have achieved more or less everything that we wanted to with our lives. It's all nonsense, of course, and football fans contemplating their own mortality know that it is all nonsense. There will be hundreds of loose ends. Maybe we will die the night before our team appears at Wembley, or the day after a European Cup first-leg match, or in the middle of a promotion campaign or a relegation battle, and there is every prospect, according to many theories about the afterlife, that we will not be

able to discover the eventual outcome. The whole point about death, metaphorically speaking, is that it is almost bound to occur before the major trophies have been awarded. The man lying on the pavement would not, as Frog observed on the way home, discover whether Palace stayed up or not that season; nor that they would continue to bob up and down between the divisions over the next twenty years, that they would change their colours half a dozen times, that they would eventually reach their first FA Cup Final, or that they would end up running around with the legend 'VIRGIN' plastered all over their shirts. That's life, though.

I do not wish to die in mid-season but, on the other hand, I am one of those who would, I think, be happy to have my ashes scattered over the Highbury pitch (although I understand that there are restrictions: too many widows contact the club, and there are fears that the turf would not respond kindly to the contents of urn after urn). It would be nice to think that I could hang around inside the stadium in some form, and watch the first team one Saturday, the reserves the next; I would like to feel that my children and grandchildren will be Arsenal fans and that I could watch with them. It doesn't seem a bad way to spend eternity, and certainly I'd rather be sprinkled over the East Stand than dumped into the Atlantic or left up some mountain.