

MY FIRST GAME WAS A SURREAL CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL

BY TAYMOUR KHASHOGGI

It was through playground chatter, and much to the chagrin of my parents, that I found out that the Champions League final would soon be played no more than 30 minutes from where I lived. I was 9 years old and from a football-agnostic (really football-skeptical) family. That may explain how on May 17th 2006, I showed up to the Stade De France wearing a Ronaldinho kit, thinking nothing of it, and leaving heartbroken.

There wasn't any doubt in my mind, despite not quite having grasped the concept of partisanship yet, that the team in yellow that evening was my favourite. I just showed up in the wrong kit. I also happened to be sitting in the middle of thousands of inebriated Arsenal fans, whose reactions to my presence and wardrobe seemed to include both mortifying stare-downs and pitying smiles.

When Sol Campbell's header landed in the top left corner and my half of the stadium exploded, a kind elderly gentleman turned to me, understandably mistaking my paralysis for grief, and interrupted his own celebrations to gently place his hand on my shoulder and say "Don't worry mate, there's plenty of time left." I never forgot that show of goodwill. Of course, I didn't have it in me as a shy 9-year-old to correct him: "No no. I'm actually really happy, just a bit overwhelmed, that's why I'm not screaming. And also I was gifted this Ronaldinho shirt and I'm 9 and the entire concept of tribalism is foreign to me."

All I can remember of the next half hour or so are the chants of "One Nil To The Arsenal" and "You're not singing anymore" directed towards the Barcelona faithful. The man's kind words turned out to be tragically prophetic. There was indeed, plenty of time left.

The more I reflected on that moment in the years that followed, as I came of age as a fan and my radicalisation into Arsenal-dom hardened, the more bewildered and touched I became. I would start to imagine what I would have done in his shoes. If my team, that I had followed through thick and thin, had seen at its worst and now finally at its best, had with 10 men taken the lead against Barcelona in a European Cup final, compassion would've been my last instinct.

If at that pinnacle of my Arsenal supporting journey, I was sat near a kid wearing a rival's kit, I would've privately revelled in their misery, and given the clueless parent sitting next to them a stare.

That tenderness, in what felt at the time like a heated (if not hostile) environment, probably had a profound effect on my life as an Arsenal supporter. When you're raised in a family that cares very little about football and knows very little about its culture, in which games are tuned into every four years but true fandom is so foreign, immersing yourself in the stadium experience can be intimidating.

My parents never actually warned against attending games or being a fan, and they knew that tropes of hooliganism and violence were exaggerated, but they also didn't think that football stadiums were the healthiest places for their young son to be. Instead, they encouraged me to play football and watch whichever first halves I wanted to on TV (the 9pm kick-offs of Champions League and international games always led to lively negotiations about bedtimes).

"But the second half is the most important one!!!"

"No, you have school tomorrow."

"Then let me sleep during the first half, so that

I can at least watch the second half?"

"Just record the match and watch it tomorrow."

"BUT ITS NOT THE SAME IF I ALREADY KNOW THE OUTCOME!!!"

"Why not? Just avoid the result and watch it when you have time."

"ITS. NOT. THE. SAME."

Those exact words were probably spoken about a hundred times during my childhood. Hours were spent trying to explain that a sporting event is not like the season finale of *Lost*, or the latest round of *X Factor*, where if you could just stay away from spoilers for long enough your experience would be intact. Immediacy, living something in the moment, and knowing that millions around the world are living it with you; that's what makes sport and fandom special.

Being the lone football fan in a family can cause some pretty confusing feelings. It's both a lonely and exhilarating thing. You're constantly misunderstood, but you feel lucky to have something that they don't. Like you've discovered something groundbreaking. It's what I imagine geniuses feel like. Enlightened, and incredibly alone.

The remainder of the final feels like a blur. When Barcelona scored their first, I remember the silence all around me, and the intense noise coming from far away. That contrast stayed with me.

I remember a few glances my way. "Would the kid in the Ronaldinho shirt be jumping up and down?" Nope, still paralysed.

When the second Barcelona goal went in, I remember noticing Arsene Wenger standing with crossed arms. The same Arsene Wenger whose distinctive baritone voice on French TV commentary of French national team games first introduced me to Arsenal.

"Wait, our best national team players play for this commentator's club? And the club is... named after him?"

I left the stadium upset, but quickly that sadness was replaced by the excitement of being able to tell my friends about my experience at school the next day. At 9, I couldn't grasp what it really meant. It was only in the years later, in the midst of the hardship that the following decade and a half would bring as an Arsenal fan, that I started to really feel the heartbreak of 2006. What if...?

My experience in Paris ensured that I was under no risk of absorbing any of the football-indifference of my family. On the contrary, it made me crave the next moment.

And we're starting to get some pretty remarkable ones on a regular basis.

After years of travelling to London to make the odd game, I moved to London and had the privilege of becoming a season ticket holder in 2021 (great timing, I know). I now live 30 minutes from the Emirates, and as Martinelli's strike bounced off Aké's face a few days ago, absolute chaos ensued all around me and "One Nil to The Arsenal" rang around the ground. I thought about that kind man in St. Denis. I hope he's still with us, and I hope he celebrated as much as I did.

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