

The Leicester City Football Club Miracle: Playing against the Statistics

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"The biggest sporting shock of my lifetime, and it's only my team." Gary Lineker, May 8, 2016

Being bored witless by the spectacle of gouty monarchs doing battle is exactly what most modern football is about. (The battle, of course, is waged by physically fit titan bought by those with deep wallets.) One is left to admire the specifics of individuals who are never able to justify just how much their actual value is worth. Detached from reality and inflated by the market, the latter becomes the illusion by which talent is assessed, players auctioned, and success measured.

In that particular erroneous equation, one person's celebrated Cristiano Ronaldo is as good as any other Lionel Messi, both being the grand figures in a broader game of power, capital and statistics. They represent huge clubs that take centre stage and strangle the game as a grand corporate venture rather than an emotional team experience.

English football has been particularly susceptible to the "cash flow" injection, the flood of money and the purchase of foreign players and clubs by entrepreneurs. It has meant a concentration of capital at the top end clubs, each season characterised by the next round of extortionate prices.

This season saw something quite different. Leicester City Football Club, which avoided relegation last season by six points, placing 14th, bucked rule and trend. On Monday, victory was assured after rivals Tottenham Hotspur drew with Chelsea 2-2. Leicester itself shot three into the Everton goal at the King power stadium. A stunning story, in any one's book of footballing romances. Frequently, the odds of the bookies for the club winning the English Premier League trophy were invariably fantastic.

An entire article in the *Daily Mirror* was dedicated to the subject of improbable victory. Ladbrokes, it noted, were offering odds of 5000-to-1 that the club would win. The odds for Sir Alex Ferguson to win Strictly Come Dancing? A more credible 1000-to-1.

The absurd odds put bookmakers out of pocket by \$15 million. This prompted Cork Gaines to call the odds a sham, a sensible remark given that "no team in a 20-team professional league should ever be 5,000-to-1 to win the championship, even in the typically top-heavy Premier League." [1] (By way of contrast in another competition, the Cleveland Browns are currently 200-to-1 to triumph in the Super Bowl.) Serves them right. Their ploy to earn ruddy cash in such a measure dramatically sunk them.

Even former England footballer and Leicester-born Gary Lineker bought into the odds,

suggesting that he would present Match of the Day “in just my undies” should the club win the trophy.

Riyad Mahrez, Jamie Vardy and N’Golo Kante became weekly utterances of awe. They captured the interest of characters for the media opportunists, be they the vile Piers Morgan (“No superstars. No money. No fancy stadium. No excuses. No fear.”), or the British Prime Minister, David Cameron.

Not all of Leicester City’s triumph was self-grown and self-directed. Its professionalism, working alongside Claudio Ranieri’s tactical acumen, has been unquestioned, but it has found itself battling failing foes. Chelsea suffered a decline; Arsenal proved erratic when it mattered most; while Manchester United remains a scarecrow. Evidently, money cannot always buy stability. Only the raw Tottenham seemed, right to the last match, to be a



credible threat.

Leicester City, however, remains a beautiful aberration in sports. Michael Lewis’s *Moneyball* (2003) took a hard look at the story of Billy Beane, general manager of the Oakland Athletics baseball club, and decided that such factors as instinct, luck and team bonding should be abandoned before the cool crispness of numbers. This led to an obsession with money and statistical gurus, along which a good deal of passion was shed.

In the UK, this saw efforts made by such number crunchers as Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski to do the same in *Soccernomics* (2009). They found an 89 percent correlation between the income of teams in the Premier League with their rankings between 1998 and 2007, a sort of money bag junta.

The authors also decided to do their own bit of statistical speculation, drawing the erroneous conclusions that experience, wealth and population would inevitably lead to domination. Forget Africa as a foot balling power continent, they suggested. Poverty, smaller numbers, and less experience to mine there. Focus, instead, on the US, China and India, the future football super powers.

With such thinking dominating the reading of football and its success, Leicester City’s success is even richer. But it was not something those, from the bookies to the pundits, wanted to believe. They always felt that the Leicester story was more fairy tale than

miracle.[2] And they got it wrong.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/leicester-city-odds-were-a-sham-2016-5?r=US&IR=T>

[2] <http://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/soccer-fc-yahoo/leicester-city-still-enjoying-unexpected-success-224348609.html>

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