

**COLONIZING IDENTITY:
SPONSORSHIP, SPORTS & FASCISM
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It's never been easy being a fan of the Chelsea football Club of London. Perennial underachievers, before last year they had won no major trophy in a generation. However, the appointment of Dutch star Ruud Gullit as player/manager has once again made Chelsea the most fashionable team in London, playing attractive attacking football with a cosmopolitan cast of characters. Even the most cynical supporters who have seen many false Chelsea dawns recognize that this time it might just be different. With an FA Cup already in the trophy cabinet, the new economics of television, merchandising and sponsorship threaten to make this revolution permanent. Chelsea are at the cutting edge of style once again.

However, equally as important as what Gullit's appointment has meant on the pitch, is the breaking of the color line for Premiership managers that it represented. While there are of course many black players, this is the first black face (not even mentioning his dreads) in high-level management. The symbolism of that is vitally important and there is much to celebrate in the fact that the team associated with supporters of the fascist National Front in the 80s is now also at the cutting edge of the battle against racism in sport and society.

Whilst the victory over Middlesbrough in the 1996 FA Cup Final marks the beginning of what supporters are convinced is a new era, it also signaled the end of a shameful association that the club had been involved in for the last three years with their sponsors, the American beer company COORS -- well known in the United States as a leading force of the "radical right" and the frightening politics of intolerance and racial bigotry that it represents.

Gullit has been a masterful presence, a true innovator, bringing something unique to English football. Yet for me personally, the visceral pleasure that I have received from his sublime skill has been tempered by the flash of bigotry and hatred that I could not help but see whenever the Coors crest snuck into the picture on the front of his shirt. It's as if Jesse Owens had been forced to wear Hitler's swastika!

Sponsorship is a double-edged sword. It buys corporations visibility and a place where it matters -- on the pitch and hopefully in the hearts of fans -- in the belief that the emotional *meaning* of the game or the team will be transferred to the sponsoring company. However, the reverse is also true. Meaning can just as easily transfer *from* the company *to* the club that it sponsors. The *fit* between a club and its sponsor should therefore be as important to the club as it is to advertisers.

In the United States the Coors Company, family-run and controlled, has long been known for its unethical business practices, having been the target of consumer boycotts from the 1960s for its rabid anti-labor policies and attitudes towards racial groups (William Coors in 1984 infuriated African-Americans by claiming that blacks "lack the intellectual capacity to succeed"). Cited by the government for discriminatory hiring practices, long-time opponents of civil rights, they were supporters of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Through its financial support of a number of reactionary groups the Coors family (born-again Christian fundamentalists awaiting Armageddon) are connected with a network of ultra-conservative and far-right institutions who have direct ties with the fundamentalist religious right as well as anti-Semitic, neo-fascist and racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. (For fuller details see researcher Russ Belant's book *The Coors Connection: How Coors Family Philanthropy Undermines Democratic Pluralism.*)

As commercialization in football grows, clubs will increasingly have to make *ethical* choices about where money flows into the game and what and whose *values* they are associated with.

The *moral* conflicts inherent in this process are best illustrated by looking at Gullit's role in this web of politics, sport and meaning. Black and dreadlocked, he was among the first to offer a different face for the previously whites-only club of European soccer. He is also a man of conscience, aware of the mantle of responsibility thrust upon him, and has been outspoken about racism in sport and society. His 1987 European Footballer of the Year award was dedicated to the imprisoned Nelson Mandela and the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa. When he met Mandela, he was visibly moved to tears. High irony that for two years he wore the corporate crest and participated (unknowingly) in funneling money into the coffers of a family that supported Mandela's captors and is a leading force for racial hatred in the United States.

My friends have teased me about my support for a club with such odious connections. But of course I have no choice, because I did not

"choose" Chelsea in any conscious way. Chelsea is part of my being, and has been since 1965, when I was 9, and went to my first game at Stamford Bridge (lost 1-0 to Liverpool).

I was an immigrant kid (born in Kenya of Indian parents), 3 years in a country where Asian faces were still rare, desperately trying to belong, to connect, with a society that had no role models for people like me. Looking back, I can now see that Chelsea bonded me with "England" and my definition of myself as an "Englishman". The late millionaire director+ Matthew Harding talked about Chelsea being in his blood (his father a fan). I am not sure about the notions of cultural purity in such talk of blood, but I do know that once I had connected with Chelsea (and by extension England) it became part of my *identity*, and I can no more discard that part of me than I can my ethnicity.

I think *family* is the best metaphor for my relationship with Chelsea and in that sense, I have been confronted for the last three years with an alienating internal presence not of my choosing. And I could not just leave (you resign from clubs, not families).

Chelsea certainly has room to be a "broad church," and despite my very different values and politics, I can even tolerate (if not outright welcome) conservatives like David Mellor and John Major -- they are fans after all and, I am willing to believe, decent enough human beings. Even the hooligans with whom Chelsea are publicly associated are perhaps more part of the "family" that I would like to admit. But there is no space in the Chelsea family for the Coors Klan. Not fans, they are American reactionaries who have used the good name of Chelsea and Ruud Gullit to further their own political ends.

Whatever local allegiances may be, all fans of conscience should celebrate the end of the sponsorship contract with Coors and the banishing of bigotry from Stamford Bridge.