

on the under-dog: how the faroe islands toppled greece

On 14 November 2014, the Faroe Islands played Greece in a qualifier for Euro 2016. In FIFA's official world rankings Greece were at a healthy 18th place, while the Faroe Islands languished at a sickly 187th. Although David and Goliath match-ups are everywhere in football, there was something special about this one thanks to the unique optimism of the Faroese and the rare size of the gap between these teams. While FIFA rankings aren't exactly a reliable indicator of quality, they do tell you something about the relative history, scale and form of both clubs – Greece having had an underdog moment of their own when they won the competition in 2004, and the Faroe Islands with only a few wins to their name in international football.

The Faroe Islands had only been competing in UEFA tournaments since 1992, so many of the fans in attendance at the game in Piraeus would genuinely have been with the team from the very beginning. Those travelling fans would have had a strong sense of narrative; not just the kind rooted in folk tales and the testimony of elderly relatives, but one born of lived experience and prolonged frustration. At the time, the country had only won nine games in international tournaments, all of which were against opposition like San Marino, Malta and Luxembourg. A colour-coded list of their historic results is a continuous block of red punctuated by sparse green flashes. Whole lustrums go by without a single victory.

But great underdog stories require more than just a team that's unlikely to win. Hearing the hardcore fans of Skansin testify, witnessing the impressive football infrastructure in the Faroe Islands, noting that the country has the highest number of football supporters per capita, all engenders the idea that the Faroe Islands are arguably the most romantic underdogs in international football. It's true that San Marino have *only ever won one game*, and there are plenty of tiny island nations that fall below the Faroese in both FIFA rankings and win/loss ratios, but none of these evergreen whipping boys have the same fanatical support and ingrained football culture as the Faroe Islands. They're the kind of nation that would mark those rare triumphs as important collective milestones.

There are also those pastoral, otherworldly absurdities at the heart of Faroese football – the inclement, erratic weather; the seafaring pitches like Bajau huts; the league team that mistakenly adopted a black and white kit in honour of the Arsenal side they watched on colourless sets. It's a lyrical sort of adversity rooted in landscape, culture and outsider pride.

The result of that game in 2014 is obvious by the very premise of this article. The Faroe Islands recorded an historic 0-1 away win in Piraeus *and* repeated the feat on home soil in June 2015, achieving the quantifiably biggest upset in international football, according to that 169-place disparity in world rankings. Undoubtedly the world cheered when the final whistle blew in Greece, but what's behind our collective impulse to root for David over Goliath? Even more mysterious is what motivates supporters of these browbeaten teams that face defeat after defeat and perhaps never even dream of victory. It's one thing to support a team that's never going to win the Premier League or the World Cup, but it's a whole other matter to follow a team for whom a *single victory* is a remarkable achievement.

I think it all goes to the very heart of what football is about. We often talk about 'rooting for the underdog' as a very idiosyncratically British trait – in contrast to American triumphalism, for instance – but its cultural specificity is probably overstated, particularly if we think about it outside the narrow confines of football. Underdog stories are everywhere in literature, from Lord of the Rings to Kafka and, so I contend in this article, the idea is rooted in some deeply embedded moral and political ideologies that have been around in some form for centuries.

David and Goliath: an allegory of power

The original Biblical parable of David and Goliath is a good place to start, being a source of both moral and literary tropes.

At first glance, the story seems to be a fairly simple parable about the folly of underestimating the small, powerless and weak. However, as Malcolm Gladwell points out in *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, the story conceals many more complexities. David actually outdoes Goliath because of his *skill* with a slingshot; he's not just a plucky upstart but a well-trained marksman. Gladwell also conjectures that David's apparent weakness is the source of his strength (youth, agility) while Goliath's strength is the source of his weakness (a lumbering, short-sighted giant suffering from acromegaly). In the same way, football's underdogs can benefit from their opponents' complacency or their own acclimatisation to unusual conditions. It reminds me of a great story in Oliver Sacks' classic *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* about a jazz drummer with Tourette's – when he took medication to relive the physical tics that he assumed were a handicap, the drummer found he lost his inimitable style and, with it, his strength and passion. The reaction to the Class of '92 takeover of Salford FC demonstrates that fans of outsider teams can grow concerned when 'success' comes at the price of homogeneity. Being an underdog – warts and all – can be an identity and the source of a paradoxical strength.

It is not, in short, simply Goliath's sin of pride or David's virtue of courage that tips the balance in the fight, but more accurately a *clash of different capabilities*.

Once we take into account the weaponry and skill that David possesses, he's not so disadvantaged after all. In one-off FA Cup clashes, the underdog has the element of surprise, the chance to field their full-strength team and the undeniable advantage of wanting to win the game a hell of a lot more than their distracted opponents. It's like running from a predator as opposed to running for prey. Over a longer period – say the length of a season – can we still realistically talk about underdogs at all? If Leicester City go on to win the Premier League this season have they been lucky? Has there been some sort of *injustice* against the 'better' squads?

The whole notion becomes clearer if we place the original story in the wider Biblical context: it's presented in the moral framework of Jesus' incredible humility and the meek inheriting the Earth. The David and Goliath battle is actually a microcosm of the radical Biblical instruction to *challenge consolidated power*.

This is the moral and political ideology that I see underpinning the support for the underdog. As Nietzsche argued, Christian morality was the morality of supplanting the powerful and artificially elevating the weak – giving the meek the Earth and arming David with a slingshot. In the hands of Foucault, the supplanting of extant power becomes the *very definition of justice itself*. As he puts it, 'the proletariat doesn't wage war against the ruling class because it considers such a war to be just. The proletariat makes war with the ruling class because [...] it wants to take power. And because it will overthrow the power of the ruling class it considers such a war to

be just.’

This is a common thread in post-enlightenment thinking. A contemporary philosophical mistrust of abstract ideals leads to the traditional leftist support of certain groups (LGBT+, ethnic minorities, the disabled) being carried out, *not in the name of human rights*, but as a means of granting power to the ‘marginalised’. Once something concrete like human rights falls by the wayside, you’re left defining your ideology only *structurally* and thereby banking on the eternal existence of marginalised people to retain a notion of right and wrong – or, as Foucault states in the context of class: ‘in a classless society, I am not sure that we would still use this notion of justice’. We saw it in action with the Occupy movement that failed to articulate a positive vision beyond the disruption of the existing order – it’s the same thinking that lets us make jokes about the privileged but not the abject, and it’s the same thinking that gives us a sense of joy when a lower league side sticks it to Chelsea in the Cup.

In football, as in capitalism, there must always be winners and losers. There will always be a lower league to draw ‘marginalised’ teams from and there’ll always be a reigning champion to knock off the perch. But I don’t think this captures everything, because I don’t agree with the Foucaultian premise. Take a look at *postcapitalism*. In their book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams point out the problem with the dead-end Occupy movement and articulate a vision with tangible values that go beyond championing the rights of the marginalised: greater efficiency, more leisure, the sharing economy, universal basic income. As supporters of the underdog, it makes us think about what we’re really in it for. Is radical politics just about usurping power or is it about some positive societal goals? Is football a sport about victories and trophies, or is it a sport about spectacle, skill, beauty and shared experience? In a utopian football future without ossified power and moneyed giants, the notion of the underdog might make less sense.

Maybe that’s why Americans don’t really go for it as much, since they’re counterintuitively much closer to an egalitarian model with the draft system in the NFL. On the other hand, our football model parallels the British class system; you’re supposed to keep it quiet if you’re from a wealthy background, just like you should be a little ashamed if you support Man United (or Havnar Boltfelag in the Faroe Islands). There’s a tongue-in-cheek jealousy to the dislike of football giants, but there’s also the nagging thought that ‘unfair’ advantages like money, influence and heritage are more important than the actual football they play.

Subverting triumph: learning to love losing

This is the overtly political framework that helps explain why the neutral roots for the underdog, but the Biblical story can also be considered in a literary context, giving us a sense of ‘the underdog’ in a more personal and subjective sense. I think this angle helps us to understand why people endure the torment of supporting hopeless teams – it’s the same emphatic embrace of nihilism that animates so much great writing.

Kafka’s stories are perfect distillations of the underdog phenomenon. They are so existentially threatening because they pit the powerless individual against an intangible, omniscient power (god, government, chaos) that, whether malign or not, embodies our fear of subordination, loss of control and hopelessness. Even if nothing *bad* happens to Kafka’s protagonists, they are just eternally barred from a sense of victory, progress or even purpose. It’s mirrored in the myth of Sisyphus – the eternally arduous duty and the masochism of repetitive torment. The Faroese victory against Greece is a slightly different version; one where Sisyphus plonks his bolder on a plateau and admires the handiwork. But only for a moment.

As such, the phenomenon of the underdog doesn’t begin and end with these isolated moments of unexpected

triumph. It's only the relentless context of Sisyphean struggle that gives the underdog story its true significance. In this sense, supporting an underdog is about relishing the truth in failure. It brings into focus those other aspects of the game that make it beautiful and personal. Just as our conception of justice is sharpened in pursuit of tangible aims when placed in a postcapitalist context, so football fans can enjoy the myriad nuances of the game once the burden of victory is lifted. It's like art that embraces failure and avoids virtuosity or finance, or music that elevates the ugly to stay outside of the dehumanising machine. It's liberating, the subversion of triumph: get rid of money, get rid of victory, get rid of arbitrary standards and you're left with a free, unfettered experience that's perhaps even more fulfilling. It was Kierkegaard who argued that to suffer is to be truly human, and his thinking inspired the common existentialist position that one should confront despair and, in so doing, actively embrace it. Fans of teams like the Faroe Islands will have a completely different relationship to the sport – a different set of criteria for appreciation, a different rationale for following their team and a more conscious engagement with overlooked aspects of the game.

Once outside of the logic of victory and progress, an underdog victory on the scale of the Faroe Islands beating Greece can simply be about self-affirmation. Winning a game like that propels you into the forefront of the football world's consciousness for a short time. David Foster Wallace said, 'you will become way less concerned with what other people think of you when you realise how seldom they do', but while you may be less concerned with *what* they think, you'll be more desperate that they think of you at all.

Doing battle with God

There's one more crucial point to make about the David and Goliath story – it's often noted that David's victory fundamentally stems from his piety (in other words, God is on his side). This interpretation inspires something of a romantic picture that aligns underdog victories with *faith* and *conviction* or even some sort of supernatural assistance. These are all fairy tales of course – the hand of God was just Maradona's fist and the divinely guided rock from the slingshot was just David's keen arm. But maybe this is what the underdog victory really stirs up in people; a sense of unseen forces at work. A sense of mystery.

So if the real superpower in our parable is God, and if God is on David's side, then perhaps *Goliath is the underdog after all*. Turning the story right on its head, Goliath is simply squashed by omnipotence like every one of Kafka's anti-heroes. Maybe underdogs never really triumph because isolated victories are meaningless and true success makes you one of the bad guys. The real victory is in acknowledging failure and turning out to support your team without staking your happiness on the end result. Power corrupts and the burden of past glories is heavy – just ask any England fan in a World Cup year. A little more failure might do some teams the world of good.