

# SWEET LEFT FOOT

Chris Tait



The now infamous yacht summit - billed as "On the Watergate" or "Lost at Sea", when the key players within the club hierarchy gathered together to discuss the future direction of the S\*\*\*\*s D\*\*\*\*t subsidiary we know and love as Newcastle United FC, was undoubtedly little more than a brief discussion to assess the minimum requirements for Premier League survival and what little financial outlay was necessary to achieve it. That shamefully modest target continues to represent the height of Ashley's "ambition" for United and the PR tactics employed to lead on and ultimately hoodwink fans and the media alike are now tried and tested, so Kinnear's brief was clear.

1. There will be no new permanent signings, but no one must know that with any certainty until 11.01pm on 2nd September.
2. Punters must be made to understand that retaining players who are far too good for their little club is as successful as signing new ones.
3. The club should be linked with at least one player every other day in the lead up to the window closing - it doesn't matter who, where or why as they won't be coming anyway.
4. On transfer deadline day, place yourself as far away from SJP as possible to avoid having to speak to anyone who is aware of 1-3 above - which of course is everyone. None of this will change as long as the FCB and his tardy entourage remain in situ - so let's move on, there's no other choice. The more we complain, the happier he is, so don't give him the pleasure, I say.

It was in this atmosphere of total distrust and increasing disconnection that I took the decision to forego the opening two home games of the season and flit off to the USA for a short spell and, apart from the potential goal of the season from, if he stays fit, the likely player of the season, I didn't seem to miss very much at all. In my defence (if one is needed), there were a number of reasons for this, mainly around

baseball fixtures, the availability of cheap flights and the potential for free accommodation for at least part of the trip. But the main driver for this impromptu abdication of duty was the fact that watching sport in the States is just so much more...well...fun.

Fun is not a word I generally



associate with English football and certainly following the Toon offers little in terms of joy and contentment these days, but I was particularly interested in precisely why US sports fans seem to have more fun watching their chosen pastime than ourselves. Obviously there are fundamental and historical cultural differences between those attending games in the UK and those in the US, and maybe I inevitably see only part of the picture whenever I travel over there. But there just doesn't seem to be the same spite, hatred, pettiness and potential for violence that exists over here despite the fierce rivalries and undoubted passion on display. Indeed, a matter of hours after watching the Yankees defeat the Orioles in a good-natured but highly competitive contest which passed off without incident, I was on the plane back home when I read about the Port Vale assault on Wolves fans following their home defeat the previous day. Predictable to some degree, but why exactly? It's not like the Yanks don't like a scrap as - President Assad will probably discover

Anyone who maintains that Newcastle United is currently in the grimy hands of a band of incompetent fools with no clear strategy and no clue as to how to implement one is, to revive a classic phrase much favoured in the local press over recent decades, well wide of the mark. If anything, the opposite is true - our latest transfer window body swerve was carried out with remarkable aplomb and is yet another fine example of the Ashley mantra in action, namely "inaction" wherever possible.

I think the format and rhythm of the relative sports must of course play a part. Real football has none of the natural breaks inherent within a baseball or American football game so there are few opportunities to take a breather, gather your thoughts and reflect carefully and calmly on the

honest, but in the 17 years I have been watching Major League Baseball, both live - around 10 games in all (not a lot maybe, but it is 3,500 miles even to home games, so I'd say I was doing ok) - and on TV, aside from one or two malevolent clashes - usually involving New York and Boston (and most notably between current Yankee drug pariah Alex Rodriguez and Red Sox catcher Jason Varitek a few years back as I recall) - incidents of "handbags" etc. are few and far between.

But, I hear you cry, 'baseball's not a contact sport so there's bound to be no aggro'. Hmm, well, if you've ever seen a base runner hurtle towards a catcher at home plate or at a second baseman or shortstop trying to turn a double-play, you may think otherwise. That's aside from the fact that the raison d'être of the game is to hurl a small, hard ball towards a bloke 60 feet 6 inches away at almost 90mph - aal full beamers an aal, nee booncin' - then you'd reasonably expect to witness far more on-field conflict. It's to the players credit that there seems to exist a mutual respect between them, which appears to spread up into the stands, where opposing fans sit and eat happily together (there's a lot of eating at these events, and I mean a lot) and of course stand together and honour their flag when God Bless America is traditionally blared out during the 7th innings stretch. It wouldn't happen here, or at least it doesn't at the moment and I for one doubt it ever will.

And it's not just "rounders for big lads" either, so don't throw that old curveball at me. You can reduce any sport to the basic mechanics of the game itself in an attempt to denigrate it, but why bother? Football is, after all, just 22 blokes humping a bit of leather around a field for 90 minutes, rugby is 26 or 30 blokes chucking and chasing a big egg for 80, and there are any number of great sports which are based solely around the activity of smacking a little round object with a bit of wood, which as well as golf,

performance of the officials or the latest display of ineptitude from your useless right back. The continuous ebb and flow of real football makes pausing for quiet reflection virtually impossible, which is why I spend most matches on the verge of rising to my feet and delivering a volley of expletives to the latest (fully deserving) miscreant. Events on the field are undoubtedly a factor, too. Many of the top players in what is referred to Stateside as the EPL, are first rate knob-ends who challenge every decision no matter how ludicrous their case and often spend entire afternoons either arguing with the referee or looking for a pointless, childish fight with an opponent. I'm not talking about Sunday morning cloggers here either but "top players" like Van Persie, Suarez, Cole and Rooney, all of whom have a justifiable reputation for nasty and underhand activities - but they are by no means alone in that. Perhaps it is they who have latterly deemed football a fun-free zone.

Now I'm no expert on ice hockey or rugby with crash helmets and shoulder pads I'll be

tennis and cricket, would also apply to the wonderful game of baseball I'll admit. But in between the games I attended in 2 of the magnificent ball parks scattered across that vast nation, there was still the small matter of seeing those 2 United home games to address and, beginning my trip in Philadelphia, as I was, there was only one course of action for any Toon army member on tour in that part of the world to take, which was to contact the local Geordie embassy in Pennsylvania, #ToonArmyPhilly, on Twitter.

After a short conversation, I was duly provided with my mission details which were to convene at the Tir Na Nog Irish bar on Arch Street at 9.30am – a ridiculous time to commence a day's drinking on any match day as I was subsequently to discover – which I duly did. I was met there by namesake Chris, a key member of this unlikely Geordie outpost, who seemed to agree that Guinness is an appropriate breakfast drink - and the battle with our livers commenced.

We were joined by Brett, who had studied at Newcastle University a few years back and had ultimately fallen for the city and its shambles of a football club (in current hands at least) as well as another fifteen or so die-hards who had rocked up for what would prove to be a relatively sterile draw with West Ham. Given the unengaging fare on offer on the big screen, I sought to discover a little more about the origins of ToonArmyPhilly and the relative motivation of its members to get out of bed early on a precious weekend to watch Shola falling over his feet whilst being flagged offside thousands of miles away.

One fan (who'll I'll call Dan for the purposes of this article, because, well, that was his name like), was an ex-pat, so like all of us has been saddled with the burden of footballing underachievement by virtue of a happy accident of birth. Easy one there. Brett was, as I said, a Toon uni. alumnus so had maintained that link since returning somewhat reluctantly to the States whereas Chris and the others had deliberately singled us out as kindred spirits, brothers in arms, and had recognised and identified closely with something inherently worthy in our stout refusal to desert the lads when all logic suggested the opposite course of action was the most appropriate.

In fact, to the utter disgust of those present, I myself had applied an entirely contrary approach when I became a long-distance Yankee fan on my first visit to New York in 1996, taking the view that I had suffered more than enough at home so I was therefore entitled to become a US glory-hunter in a Manure Utd. stylee, a point which was not lost on my hosts who seemed to view the tourist-friendly Bronx Bombers as two levels below dog turd in the sporting food chain for that very reason.

I've always believed that, even in the Super Sky age of transferrable club loyalties and success on demand, Newcastle fans generally view perennial failure and disappointment as being the incontrovertible nature of things and it's this steadfast, stoic acceptance of one's lot in life that seems to have attracted many like-minded Americans with a passion for the beautiful game. That and having a kick-ass city to

visit with a local population unrivalled in terms of hospitality, humour and round-the-clock supping, which are the three main criteria I generally employ when identifying and selecting potential holiday destinations. So I was in good hands.

There was one incident however which I simply could not let pass and forgive me if I brought shame upon the Geordie Nation © by confronting it head on in a bar far, far away. But there was one individual in attendance who was clearly not a member of the ToonArmy Philly and yet seemed to know everything about our fair city and the grand folk within it. In what I can only describe as an English southern accent (Cambridge, as it transpired) trying desperately to transform itself into a cool US twang, I heard the following "you see Chris – no, the other one - the reason why Geordies love their club so much is that it's so depressing in the north east, it's all they have up there really so...blah, blah, misinformed blah..". Now I could have let that pass or had "a quiet word " but somehow I thought a firm but fair "F\*\*K OFF MAN" was more in order so I duly delivered one, followed immediately by a short tourist information lecture on God's own region – Baltic, SageGateshead, Ouseburn, the Tyneside Cinema, our magnificent theatres and those bridges, of course - to a somewhat startled one-man audience who then went on to mumble a half-arsed apology, claiming he wrote for the Guardian (no surprise there) and that he'd probably been to Newcastle maybe once, if at all. I was barely registering him by that point. The other members of TAP

smiled knowingly in approval, so my work there was done.

At the final whistle, Chris, Brett and I had what I can only describe as "a good sesh" – 4 pints before noon can only go one way, after all – where I was to learn that (a) the guy named Matt Feltz from Boston whose article followed mine in the current Mag I'd taken along, had been a recent visitor to the Tir Na Nog – small world, as they say. – (b) Chris was the drummer in a local band called The City and Horses who, I was to learn later, were quite stunning, particularly to those of us with peerless musical tastes, many of which I shared with drummer Chris – Trashcan Sinatras, Belle and Sebastian, Orange Juice, Teenage Fanclub, Aztec Camera as well as Chris's favourite, our very own Prefab Sprout. Check this little gem out for instance <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwS1pzX6wJE> - and finally (c) that Brett sold premium executive boxes at Lincoln Memorial Field, home of the Philadelphia Eagles "football" team, and would I like both executive and pitchside passes for the open training day as his guest the following Monday?? Err, would I ever, and what a truly memorable day it was, Brett very kindly taking me on a behind the scenes, access all areas tour of the stadium where a viewing suite would set you back \$200,000 per season - prawn sandwiches extra, of course. Thanks again, Brett, it was a great experience.

So despite the fact that I was on a subway train to the Bronx when HBA curled his beauty into the top corner against Fulham, almost a mirror image of the goal he scored down there last season, I left for home with some great memories and some new friends of the black and white persuasion. It's on trips like this that you begin to appreciate that, in spite of a present owner intent on perennial mediocrity, asset stripping and shell suit sales tie-ins, Newcastle United is still a special football club with a world-wide appeal, even if that appeal is based upon a shared understanding of the nature of coping with defeat and the disappointments that life throws at you; an appreciation of fine and not so fine ales consumed in large measure; and, crucially, an acceptance that winning trophies is not really your thing. I wouldn't have it any other way and I now know the members of ToonArmyPhilly wouldn't either. Gan canny lads, see you all again soon.

