

Love isn't a game for two halves

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Stuff the FA Cup. A psychotherapist knows what the score is in her relationship

At the ripe old age of 49, I have finally married. Making a commitment to a lifelong football fan, however, is not an easy business. Growing up in California, I never had so much as a glimpse of the game. Even after 20 years in England the whole business seemed as foreign to me as drinking warm beer and laughing at Benny Hill. As a psychotherapist, however, I knew that if I was to make a success of my marriage I had to understand the strange goings-on in the mind of a football fan. I've come to notice all sorts of odd behaviours and rituals on the part of my husband, such as sudden mood swings after hearing football results. I'd mistakenly think that he simply couldn't contain his affection towards me when, in fact, it usually had more to do with his team winning.

He can stare endlessly at soccer scores and reports on television. God knows how he finds this entertaining. They say that women manipulate, but that's nothing compared to the lengths to which a football fan will go to get extra time reading the sports pages. And for the life of me, I couldn't understand why he supported a losing team. It's like choosing to travel on the *Titanic* when you could just as easily fly British Airways.

I've since learnt that choice has nothing to do with it, that once you've made a commitment to a team it's usually for life. But why is it that men often never learn to translate this amazing capacity to commit to real relationships? As we say on the West Coast, "go figure". Just as Diana, Princess of Wales, had the third presence of Camilla Parker Bowles in her marriage, I had to come to terms with the fact that my husband came into this union with a lifelong love, namely Crewe Alexandra. I needed to understand my rival for his affection. For instance, I knew my place in this relationship and it certainly wasn't to stand in front of the TV when the footie was on. And a survey out this weeks shows that I'm not the only football widow out there. Football fans think of the beautiful game approximately once every 12 minutes. The study of 2,000 fans, sponsored by Virgin Money, discovered they think about football on average 80 times a day.

Could Crewe Alexandra possibly offer more to him than I could? It struck me that this whole love affair with a team might have been a replacement for the real thing. Let me explain. We both had long periods between relationships when we were single, but he seemed to have coped better than me. I had girlfriends. He had football. I had therapy. He had football. I had the gym. He had football. Guess who did a better job at not cracking up? Football fans are ahead by miles. Hard as it is to admit, there seem to be advantages to being one.

Supporting a team gives a sense of belonging and purpose. Fellow fans provide companionship and potentially lonely weekends are filled. The game also provides an outlet for strong emotion. Victories bring elation, but the disappointment of defeat is shared and thereby eased. Men tend not to have the close, intimate relationships that women have. But football gives them a context in which to be together and even to express affection towards each other without fear of being considered “gay”. It gives legitimacy to men feeling an emotional attachment to each other as they share the sport’s triumphs and despair.

Watching football even offers quasi-sex. The whole game is about building up to a big orgasm shared by thousands. Soccer is usually a low- scoring game, so after wave upon wave of attacks and several tantalising near-misses, when a goal is finally scored the emotional release is electric and nearly as good as the real thing. Just read *Fever Pitch* by Nick Hornby for (male) confirmation. There are the obvious sexual analogies – such as “scoring”, “getting it in” – but there are more subtle ones, too. A 1-0 win is always more satisfying if the goal is scored towards the end of the game, whereas if it arrives early it is more like premature ejaculation; job done, but not nearly as much fun. A 5-0 victory, though, is nothing less than a multiple orgasm, the ultimate male fantasy, and it happens only in football grounds.

Furthermore, women’s feelings and desires don’t have to be considered, there is no performance anxiety; leave that to the players and manager. But this cosy little affair has dangers when its modus operandi is transferred to real relationships. For example, your team will never abandon you. But who else can give you that kind of guarantee? Freud argued that all human behaviour is motivated by either a fear of abandonment or retaliation. If that’s the case, being a football fan puts you in a risk-free zone. Fans heap abuse on players, managers and directors who rarely answer back. This is a one-sided relationship in which there is no retaliation or rejection, where the recipient of your affection never expresses criticism or disappointment towards you. Can you imagine finding a woman to agree to that? OK, clubs may occasionally ban a fan, but only the very worst behaved. And frankly, I don’t think there would be many women at the turnstiles ready to rescue such a hooligan.

Fans are also never responsible when things go wrong. It is either the players who are not performing, the manager making poor decisions, or the directors not spending enough money. It’s never the fan’s fault. In other words, he takes neither risks nor responsibilities, only shows up for games and demands that the team do well for him. It is a relationship in which the man is never wrong. How’s that for a fantasy come true? For real-life relationships to succeed both parties need to take responsibility and avoid pushing all the blame on the other. They depend on the capacity of partners to respond to each other’s needs and to compromise. A good relationship also means that there is usually someone there to tell you when you’re behaving like an idiot, something apparently lacking for those fans who always see their team as being wronged, the victim of ridiculous refereeing decisions. A fantasy develops that the wrongness always lies outside the team. Such unchallenged faith might even explain the national delusion that always surfaces before World Cups and European Championships; namely, that England has a great team that should win. The danger for such men is that they end up managing their personal relationships in the same manner as they relate to their team. They may lose the will to work on something that, although ultimately more fulfilling, demands more risk and responsibility.

Just turning up for games and following the club’s fortunes is a lot easier than trying to remember anniversaries, say the right thing, or trying to fathom the alien depths of the female mind and emotions. Given the choice between a woman and a football team, it’s sadly perhaps no wonder that the girl often gets relegated down the priority league.

Staying in the premier league : Here are some tips to help you keep your relationship onside

- It is more important to appreciate how important football is to him than to understand the game.
- Keep quiet when the football results are on. And don't try to have any meaningful conversations during a game; his brain is elsewhere.
- Don't feel you have to go to matches. Unlike women, men don't always need company – they're happy going by themselves or with mates.
- However, it's not a bad idea to go to a game to see what all the hysteria is about, but don't expect to find sushi at the food bar. Take an apple.
- Likewise, it's not necessary to watch matches on the telly. But he'll appreciate it if you share the excitement of the really big games with him. I recommend the World Cup. You'll enjoy watching the boys from
- Argentina strut their stuff.
- Don't be intimidated by all the rules. Remember, if it's something all men can join in on, it can't be that complicated.
- If you really want to impress him, learn the offside rule; it'll earn you points.
- You're allowed to say enough is enough. Don't leave it to him to know when to put down the sports pages or turn off the telly.
- You do have a big problem when you're married to one of those nuts who has to go to every game, home and away. Give up. Have a baby, or get a dog.