

Of Bread, Circuses – and Mbappé



Kylia Mbappé

by Theodore Dalrymple

In my isolated house in rural France where there is no television, I went to the local café – seven miles away – to watch the final of the World Cup football match between France and Argentina. The World Cup is by far the most popular sporting contest in the world, watched by goodness knows how many billions. Anyone would think it was important.

My wife, who came with me, is always astonished that I know so much about football, at least by comparison with her, without evincing any great interest in it from one World Cup final to the next. I know the rules and I have even heard of some of the most famous players, including the star of the French

team, Kylian Mbappé.

The game is different from how it was in my youth, more than 60 years ago, when I took an interest in it. The pitches were then of grass and were churned into mud whenever it rained. The leather ball was like Ophelia's dress: soon so heavy with its drink that it was difficult even for the strongest players to kick it far.

Those who headed the heavy ball often later suffered a form of dementia similar to that of boxers' so called dementia pugilistica: much later in my career, I remember reading a paper by a neuropathologist called Corsellis on this subject.

In those days, footballers, though much admired by schoolboys such as me, were not well-paid. Indeed, there was a maximum wage paid for their efforts set down by the Football League (a restriction that in those days everyone found perfectly normal), which was about that of a skilled manual worker.

After the match, having been watched by crowds of up to 70,000 in dilapidated stadiums with roofs of corrugated iron, if they had any at all, they went home on the bus; young footballers stayed either with their parents if they lived in the town for whose team they played, or in lodgings with a landlady who looked after them like a substitute mother.

We collected pictures of them on cigarette cards, which we stuck in an album and thought it important to have a complete set, swapping duplicates with the seriousness of stockbrokers of old. Of course, cigarettes are now almost as much a thing of the past as are the picture cards that came in their packets, replaced largely by the much healthier cannabis.

Of the footballers' private lives we knew nothing, and indeed the very thought of inquiring about them was completely alien to us. They were stars or heroes for 90 minutes a week, not the object of our prolonged thoughts. The cigarette cards were but a manifestation of the impulse to collect, which all boys

in those days went through.

The game, or profession, of football has since changed rather considerably since, and even the lesser players of the professional clubs become millionaires overnight, almost on signing up. And while, as a professional pessimist, I hate to acknowledge improvement, the fact is that the improved conditions – the all-weather pitches, the lighter ball, the football boots like ballet shoes – mean that the players are infinitely more skilled than they were, and fitter and more athletic too.

As a spectacle, the game has improved beyond all recognition, such that even my wife, whose grasp of the rules is fluctuating, can appreciate the phenomenal skill of the players. My French brother-in-law tells me (and so it must be true) that Mr. Mbappé has a three-year contract with Paris Saint-Germain, the premier French team – owned for 600 million Euros by, like so much of Paris, Qatar. This, I think, establishes beyond reasonable doubt that we live in a regime of bread and circuses, though the way things are going, even the bread might become problematical.

Strangely enough, Mr. Mbappé, notwithstanding a salary that would make Pharaoh envious, seems to retain a pleasant personality, not at all arrogant, with a charming smile. He is not petulant and does not lose his temper, as if he were above all that, secure in his mastery of what he does. He has a God-given, but mankind-honed, gift; it is often forgotten that good fortune is as much a test of character as ill fortune, perhaps even a greater one.

Still, I would not be quite human if I did not have thoughts concerning the huge quantities of money showered in Mr. Mbappé's direction at a time when some people are having difficulty in paying their heating bills. This is all the more the case since Paris Saint-Germain is a loss-making enterprise, and therefore his salary is in effect a subsidy.

Can I be against subsidies as such? I am sometimes the beneficiary of them myself, though to a trifling extent by comparison with those of Mr. Mbappé. It is all a question of what the subsidizers value – as well, of course, as their means. But by their subsidies – what they subsidize – shall ye know them.

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