

WHO KILLED THE FA CUP?

IS THIS FOOTBALL'S GREATEST WHODUNIT? WE ARE TOLD THE FA CUP IS DEAD, BUT WHO ARE THE MAIN SUSPECTS AND WHICH ONE IS GUILTY? JOE CARROLL TURNS DETECTIVE TO FIND OUT.



The Football Association

Murder enquiries often begin at home, with killers often known to their victims. So what better place to start than The Football Association, the oldest of its kind in the world and, since 1863, a leading example to all new and burgeoning associations across the globe.

The brainchild of the newly formed governing body, the Football Association Challenge Cup was to be a knock-out competition fit for its member clubs across the country. The idea was put to the FA committee by then Secretary, C.W. Alcock, in 1871 and less than a year later, the amateur side Wanderers clinched victory in the inaugural final.

Since that very first FA Cup final, 43 different clubs have raised the famous trophy aloft, at venues ranging from Wembley and Cardiff's Millennium Stadium, to Goodison Park, Fallowfield Stadium (Manchester) and the Kennington Oval, while both Manchester

United and Arsenal have both won it a record 12 times. It's a competition that has developed into a national treasure and holds a place in the hearts of English football fans.

So, what exactly is the role of the FA in the demise of its very own showcase event? Since the inception of the Premier League, the FA has exerted less control over English football. While it does still have veto power over the appointments at the top of the Premier League hierarchy, the top 20 English clubs have autonomy from the FA to negotiate their own, very lucrative broadcasting deals.

As such, the FA is seen to be playing a more custodial role at the top of English football's professional tier. They act as mere guardians of the sport, while the Premier League dream up and enforce new ideas and changes on the league front. As such, the FA clings on to one of its few monuments of power: the FA Cup.

Financially, the competition simply cannot compete. 2016 Premier League winners Leicester City raked in more than £24million for their once in a lifetime achievement. In contrast, Manchester United pocketed just £1.8million for beating Crystal Palace in last year's FA Cup final. Aston Villa earned £1.2million for finishing dead last in the Premier League.

In monetary terms, the FA Cup simply isn't worth a lot of club's efforts, at least not those earning millions just for competing in the Premier League (and that's before we consider their share of broadcasting rights). What can the FA do about this gap? Well, it's not just the Premier League getting a sweet deal from broadcasting rights. In November, it was announced that the FA has agreed a six season overseas broadcast deal for countries to screen the FA Cup. Starting in 2018/19, the agreement will bank the FA a reported £820million. Domestically, the BBC and BT have the rights to show FA Cup football till 2021, at a cost of around £200million. Yet, these figures are pale in comparison to the £5.136bn monster deal struck up between the Premier League and Sky and BT, from 2016/17 to 2018/19.

Sponsorship is another way of generating revenue that can be passed on to prize money. Emirates became the most recent sponsors of the competition, following Littlewoods and Budweiser. But it is the first in the competition's history to negotiate a name change to the competition itself. For £10million a year across 3 years, the competition will be known as the Emirates FA Cup, whereas previous brands like Budweiser paid £9million a year for an "in association with" style sponsorship.

They've tried changing kick-off times of the finals, much to the dismay of traditionalists and (more importantly) match-going fans. The first deviation away from the sacred 3pm kick-off was in 2012, when Chelsea and Liverpool contested the FA Cup at 5.30pm. As well as angering Liverpoolians whose travel plans were inconvenienced by the time, traditionalists were upset that Premier League games were being played that same day, which only served to devalue the competition that had for so long been the only game on the day, kicking off at 3pm and serving as a fitting way to complete the domestic calendar.

There is some sympathy to be had for the FA, considering that UEFA rules required a clear four-week period between the end of the domestic season and the start of Euro 2012. But travelling

fans couldn't help but see the changes (not least the 5.30KO) as a middle-finger on one hand while they clutched the maximum amount of TV revenue with the other.

The precedent had already been set the previous year. Manchester City's victory over Stoke City in 2011 was the first FA Cup final to clash with league fixtures since 1934. Again, it was UEFA rules that dictated the host stadium of the Champions League final (Wembley on 28th May) must not have a fixture played two weeks prior. As such, the FA moved the FA Cup final forward, meaning it was the first final since 1989 to be played before the end of the English football domestic season.

The scheduling nightmares of 2011 and 2012 are symbolic of the FA's place at the footballing dinner table, where other bodies get first choice of the biggest slices of pie.

Were the FA left with the crumbs once UEFA (Euro 2012 and the lucrative Champions League final) and the Premier League (requiring a certain number of weekend matches and simultaneous games in the final round of fixtures) had taken their slices of the pie? Or should there have been more consideration for fans and traditionalists? Either way, the picture is that of a weakened governing body with little power and few ideas about how to keep a wheezing giant of a competition from suffocating.

There have been various attempts to try and revive the competition's popularity. In 2010, FA chief executive Ian Watmore proposed midweek FA Cup games to help make the competition "more relevant". Six years later, this idea reared its head again after reports that a midweek format was being considered ahead of a potentially congested 2022 season (with the possibility of a winter World Cup that year in Qatar). And in September, Football League chief executive Shaun Harvey threw his weight behind the proposal, but only in the context of easing fixture congestion in the first and second rounds, and in order to help them add a 'League Three' to the football pyramid.

Once again, however, it is supporters who seem to be left out of all consideration. If the FA wants a successful competition, it comes down to more than how much money can be made from broadcasters. Fans need to feel like they matter and forcing fans to take in midweek games, potentially travelling hundreds of miles in the process, might not be the best way of doing that.

One idea that may have the best chance of benefitting everyone is the removal of replays from the quarter final stage from 2016/17. Instead, matches ending in a tie will go to extra-time and must be decided on the day. Premier League clubs will enjoy the reprieve of one less fixture to contend with at the business end of the season, while for the majority of lower-league teams there is still a chance up to the sixth round for them to hold out for a second shot on their own turf.

And, there is the general consensus that the decision to host semi-finals at Wembley after its re-opening in 2007 has completely devalued the final. The romance of the competition was fuelled by the dreams of players and fans of reaching the final and having a once in a lifetime chance of appearing/visiting the most revered stadium in the country: a historic temple of worship for football fans of all persuasions.

Perhaps something of that idealism was lost when the Twin Towers of the old Wembley were bulldozed in 2003, but scheduling the two semi-finals under the now iconic arch has been a big mistake. And not just for traditionalists. Logistically, the move for travelling fans, especially those from the north of England, is another stick to beat the FA with. And rightly so. Why force Scousers, Mancunians and Geordies into unnecessary expenditure as well as putting extra stress on an already congested London transport network when Elland Road, Old Trafford or Villa Park would do?

Premier League

It's difficult to assess the culpability of our next suspect without reference to the former. After all, the kind of money that poured into the English game following the Premier League's inception is greatly responsible for helping to rescue the domestic game from the decay, decline and violence of the 1980s, and reinventing it as a globally

appealing product; a British export to rival the Spice Girls, Britpop and Richard Curtis films.

Despite one being overwhelmingly more powerful, the two bodies are inextricably linked. They are talked about as separate entities and both, of course, have their own roles within English football, but they are similarly tasked with overseeing the progress, development and ultimately the success of the English game.

However, the Premier League is only concerned with the top-flight and being a commercial entity of the FA, its actions are almost exclusively driven by money. The FA on the other hand are tasked with ensuring that the integrity of the game is upheld, while encouraging grass-roots football and facilitating the success of the rest of the professional and semi-professional football pyramid.

With this distinction made, it's easy to see why the FA Cup has been left to rot. As a commercial body for the success and growth of England's top league, there seems little sense in the Premier League using its vast amounts of cash to keep the oldest cup competition in world football in business. Why should it care?

As we saw in our earlier look at the FA's role, as one of the major players in British, European and world football, the Premier League gets first dibs when it comes to match scheduling. With the requirement that a certain number of matches are played at weekends, and the need for the final round of games to be played simultaneously, the preferences of the FA play second fiddle.

In defence of our accusation, the Premier League would be more likely to plead guilty to manslaughter than admit pre-meditated murder. The FA Cup has taken a nosedive just by the former's very existence from 1992, and the appeal of the English top flight to broadcasters, global football fans and the world's finest players. This very dominance has inadvertently shunted the once prestigious FA Cup out of the limelight.

Before we ask whether the Premier League should do something to help the competition, it's worth exploring what it could do. The common solution put forward by fans is to award a place in the Champions League to the winners of the FA Cup. This would – so the theory goes – revive the competition, with Premier League clubs more likely to take it seriously instead of fielding weaker teams in earlier rounds.

Apart from the administrative and diplomatic process of getting UEFA to agree to such an idea (at a time when the European footballing governing body is in the thick of corruption investigations and internal politics) there is one other problem with this. It's not just the Premier League clubs who need to take the competition more seriously. Just as top flight clubs scramble for their Premier League status, fielding weaker teams in the FA Cup in order to save themselves for league duty, so too do Championship clubs who prioritise their promotion-push. The promised land of the Premier League is too strong a pull even for those in the second tier. Is it realistic to expect Brighton & Hove Albion to put their promotion campaign on ice for an against-all-odds shot at making it to the qualifying rounds of the Champions League?

What would be the realistic ambitions of a Championship side in the Champions League? That's supposing a team from the Football League is capable of reaching the FA Cup final once the Champions League carrot is dangling at Wembley. Of course, the top Premier League teams will start taking it seriously. But is that really what people want? Is that really going to make the competition better? Is a competition dominated by Premier League teams the way to enhance the magic and romanticism of the FA Cup? I'd be surprised if you ever saw a giant-killing again, and that is usually what people mean by FA Cup 'romance'.

Let's suppose the final Champions League spot is awarded to the FA Cup winners. Would it be fair? After all, it's much harder to steer your team into the top four than it is to progress through six rounds of a knock-out competition. The latter is often at the mercy of luck. Teams may get favourable draws all the way to the final, playing at home or avoiding top teams. One off games can easily go in the favour of the underdog.

A strong league placing, on the other hand, is never down to luck. You can be lucky in certain games, you may even find fortune in consecutive weeks or months. But over a 38-game marathon,

the league table will leave you in no doubt as to who performed better than whom. Final standings will always be the most honest barometer of success.

Surely it's only fair that the four top-performing teams in the country should be given the chance to challenge the best Europe has to offer?

Clubs

Having examined the FA and the Premier League, it becomes obvious that the pair are very much a double act. While the latter clearly has more influence, their histories are each other's and these pasts have undeniably changed the way we think about the FA Cup. Are they partners in one of the biggest crimes in English football?

When you examine the scene at club level, another suspect emerges. Considering the limited financial reward of a cup run compared to the earnings of a strong league performance, it's clear why clubs decide to rest their best players when FA Cup weekend comes around.

And it seems that almost everyone is doing it. If it's not one of the sides in the title race rotating their squad, it's those trying to guarantee their place in Europe for the following season. If it's not clubs lurking at the wrong end of the table, keeping their best players fresh for a relegation scrap, it's Championship or even League One promotion hopefuls giving fringe players and youth their chance in the cup.

In fact, managers are more than honest about where their priorities lie. Former Stoke City manager Tony Pulis took his then team all the way to the final in 2011 but he hadn't always taken it so seriously: "When you are working as a manager, your bread and butter is the league and what you do in the league.

"I think cup games are just the icing on the cake. If we were to have a great cup run there would be no-one more pleased than me, but the league is the most important thing to the long-term future of the club."

Pulis cites the club's future as part of his rationale, but clubs have had to keep one eye on the long-term since their existence – why is an FA Cup run more likely to harm them now?

Managers are all too aware of the jump in revenue between the Premier League and the Championship and this void can be crippling for teams following relegation from the top-flight.

But the FA Cup is a trophy, and football is about winning trophies, isn't it? Arsene Wenger has his own definition of success: "We're here to win trophies, but it depends on what you call trophies.

"Is it the Champions League, the Premier League, the League Cup? We've just qualified from the group stage in the Champions League for the tenth consecutive season. That, for me, is three times as difficult as winning the League Cup five times. I know what's difficult and what's not."

At the opposite end of the spectrum to Pulis, the reason might be different but the outcome is the same. The financial gain of a Champions League place (not to mention the extra revenue and prize money earned from a decent European run) compared to a Europa League place or no Europe at all, is enough to make up the minds of top-flight managers.

Okay, so some Premier League clubs will field a 'weaker' team for their FA Cup third round tie against a League 2 outfit. But for most top-flight teams, the alternative players are still good players and surely still worth a watch, aren't they?

Could clubs lower ticket prices for FA Cup games? If the financial reward of the Premier League is so great, are FA Cup games not 'extras'? If clubs haven't accounted for the extra match day revenue from staying in the cup, then surely whatever they make from the 3rd round onwards is a bonus. A lot of clubs already reduce prices, especially for early round ties, but could it be done across the board with a little subsidy from the FA? Could they not help supporters' groups with travel costs? It might just lead to fuller stadiums and greater interest in the competition.

Media

Of course, "without fans, football is nothing". Fans know it and the legendary Celtic manager Jock Stein famously said it. Large crowds are not only a vital source of match day revenue for clubs, they're the reason why professional footballers do what they do. They started watching their own heroes and dreamed of following in their footsteps, if not seeing them in the flesh on the terraces at least watching the FA Cup final on television.

With the advent of the Premier League and 24-hour coverage in the form of Sky Sports News and other broadcasters (not forgetting the rise of mobile devices that give us as-it-happens updates on match day, injuries, team news and transfer rumours), it's much easier to get your Saturday football fix any day of the week and, more crucially, wherever you are.

The first televised FA Cup final was aired on 30th April 1938, with anyone fortunate to have a TV able to watch Preston North End beat Huddersfield Town 1-0. While the FA Cup on TV became a mainstay of the British broadcasting calendar, regular live football wasn't a feature of the TV landscape till the 1980s. Both ITV and BBC began to screen top-flight football, and by 1986, football fans could enjoy no less than 14 live domestic games.

For the 1992/93 season the new FA Premier League TV deal yielded 60 games. The most recent rights packages for Premier League football offer up 168 games per season (not taking into account the 16 live FA Cup matches shown each year by the BBC, nor Champions League, Europa League and World Cup/European Championship ties).

The 'more and now' culture of the 21st century permeates almost every aspect of our lives, and football has undoubtedly benefitted. But at what cost? Not only do we live in the age of the image, our day-to-day lives are dominated by the internet, and in a consumerist society the insistence on more football whenever we require it has desensitised us.

The FA Cup final is no longer the only chance to watch football on TV. Not only can you watch three Premier League games a week, there are Championship, League One and League Two games to fit in. Simul-cast broadcasting allows you to watch multiple Champions League games at once: up to 8 on a single match day. Then there are highlights on Match of the Day, Football on 5, Sky's Football First, BT Sport's European Football Show, ITV's Champions League highlights and countless more. And these are just the legal options. If you want to watch Nyva Vinnytsia in the Ukrainian Second League or catch Oscar tearing it up in China for Shanghai SIPG, then you can. You name it, some football-obsessed corner of the internet somewhere will be streaming it.

And you don't have to watch it at home in your living room. Thanks to smartphones and 4G, you can watch it in bed, on the toilet, in the garden, on the train or – if you're stealthy enough – in work. Desperate to be in the know, you need never again be out of the loop.

But have we reached saturation point? Seemingly not; we still appear to crave more football more often. And the charm which once radiated from the FA Cup thanks to its rarity on our screens is nothing more than an option, and usually a second or third rate option at that.

The verdict

Despite our investigations, a lot of fans still find much to like about the FA Cup. The non-league grounds, hot Bovril, Tuesday night replays and giant-killings. But there's no question that the competition is now just a peripheral figure in the shadow of bigger and more powerful players.

We've looked at four suspects, and while we've gathered evidence to put together a case against all of them, there is a fifth suspect that has emerged throughout our investigations.

Perhaps the question shouldn't be: who killed the FA Cup, but rather what killed it? For the common theme rearing its ugly head and motivating the everyday decisions of our four suspects over the past 20 years is undeniable: money.

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