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Posted by Toby Miller 5th April 2016

The carbon footprint: Can we make football greener?



On the face of it football would seem be a low-impact past time, however as environmental writer Toby Miller explains, the beautiful game is beginning to build up a huge carbon footprint...

The FSF is an important advocate for fan democracy and welfare. It seeks a greater role for the terraces, in the way our clubs are run, and a better deal for people on those terraces.

Although born in Leicester and still a Foxes fan, I cut my teeth at Craven Cottage watching Fulham in the old Third Division. I think my first game was George Cohen's testimonial, when Fulham past versus present provided the prelude to the 1966 World Cup winners taking on an International XI.

The talent on display, paying tribute to a club great whose career had ended prematurely due to injury, is etched in my mind's eye. I'm not so sure about the score, and have been unable to confirm it. Maybe 10-6 to the World Cup winners (half the team hadn't played in the Final, but who's counting?)

Fulham's ground, so close to the banks of the Thames, inevitably

makes me ponder football's relationship to the natural environment.

Fans and non-fans alike have inherited a complex ecological legacy. Climate change poses problems we must confront today and in the future.

In other parts of our lives—at work, in the street, planning vacations, organizing the trash, and recycling—we may feel confident and comfortable in trying to mitigate global warming. An environmental agenda for football may be more difficult to embrace.

Football feels almost sacred to many of us—a crucial part of who we are, rather than mere recreation.

Would cleaner, greener football mean letting go of something we love, that helps define us?

Not necessarily, but there are some real issues to ponder.

The problem

On the surface, football appears to be among the least ecologically malevolent of pastimes: it requires a ball, a field, and some players, as opposed to the engine, track, and carbon-fueled speed of [Formula 1](#).

But when we take into account where [football's equipment is made](#) and how it is transported for use; the water and chemicals involved in [ground maintenance](#); the [food consumed](#) at games; the impact of travel; and the use of electricity in producing and watching TV coverage, the story looks remarkably different. I'll focus here on the last two of these issues.

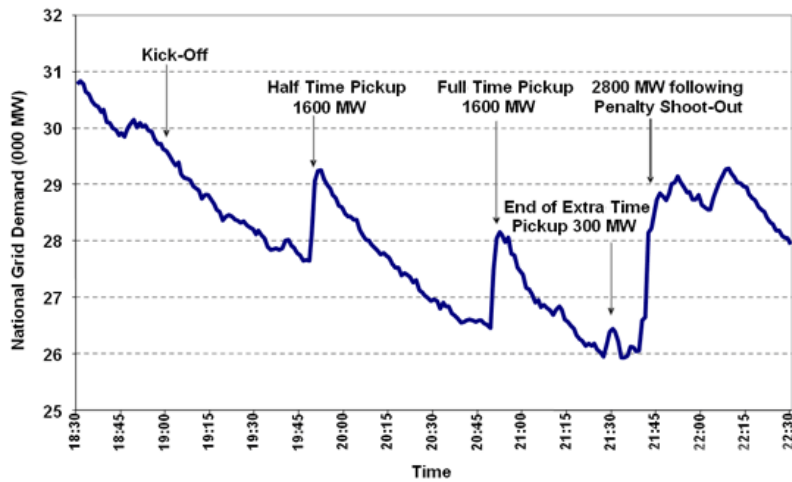
Based on solar-powered stadia, free public transportation, and a hundred thousand tonnes of carbon dioxide offset by environmental projects in India and South Africa, [Germany's 2006 World Cup](#) was said to be climate-neutral. But the data excluded international air travel. Neither FIFA nor local organizers would address the topic in a credible way.

The 2010 Finals in South Africa had the [largest carbon footprint](#) of any commercial event in world history, mostly fuelled by European tourism. 850,000 tonnes of carbon were expended, 65% of it due to flights and construction.

Brazil's 2014 Finals were supposedly played in green stadia—a veritable [Copa Verde](#). But the Cup's [green claims](#) sidestepped the national and international transportation of over three and a half million tourists, which was responsible for 84% of [its carbon emissions](#).

Then there is TV coverage, a second major contributor to football's carbon footprint.

In the UK, the [National Grid](#) promotes its management of peak electricity usage by referring to viewers' activity during half time in football, when they race to the kettle and the bathroom. Power use can surge by 10%. The graph below illustrates how the Grid handled England's demise in the 1990 Finals:



Twenty-five years later, the [Carbon Trust](#) has shown that people watching football via mobile-data phone connections multiply their footprint tenfold in comparison with viewing television or using WiFi.

What is to be done?

If we ended the World Cup Finals or their media coverage because of environmental reasons, that would be a revolution, and perhaps an unwelcome one. We can, however, alert fans to the impact of their spectatorship, so they can evaluate it and urge organizers to minimize the carbon footprint.

[FSF](#) has already gotten behind the Campaign for Better Transport, which wants clubs, local authorities, transport operators, and the government to listen to our needs, and be greener.

The Campaign's [survey of fans](#) disclosed that followers of lower-league teams must often use cars for travel, and pay high costs by comparison with most Premier League spectators. Transport makes up a quarter of Premier League fans' expenses on match day, but supporters of League Two clubs spend a third of their outlays just getting to and from the ground.

This is because many so-called 'smaller' clubs are based in towns that are underserved by public transport. Fans would prefer to travel that way—unlike [Arsène Wenger](#), who has twice sent Arsenal to the airport for the arduous trip to Norwich—a fourteen-minute flight.

The future of the World Cup is a complex matter that we all need to talk about more. But improving transportation to and from domestic football should be easy.

The Campaign made some excellent recommendations in terms of discounted or free public transport, as per Germany's [Kombi Ticket](#), car sharing, pedestrian and cycling access, and a national Football Supporters' Railcard.

The unprecedented bonanza from Premier League television rights must, of course, translate into lower ticket prices and better conditions on match day.

How about pushing these billionaires-in-boxes to subsidize public transport in our other Leagues as well? How about instituting the Railcard? How about a fine for clubs that take 14-minute joyrides from North London to Norfolk? And how about encouragement for TV networks to buy offsets to mitigate the environmental impact of

their coverage?

FSF stands up for the past, present, and future of our game. That needs to include the physical environment. We are its custodians.

So what should we do about football's ecological impact, from the carbon footprint of travel to making stadia 'green'? Those questions could form the basis of a new [FSF campaign](#) after discussion at an [Annual General Meeting](#). Here's hoping.

[Follow Toby on Twitter via @greencitizen](#)

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