

WHAT'S UP



Chelsea fans. Omar Chaudhuri feels that fans who racially abuse players should be punished more harshly.

It is common to see football fans shout at players during a game. The fans help intimidate the away players and give the home team an advantage. However, in December last year, two footballers received some unacceptable abuse from supporters.

At the start of the month, four Chelsea fans were suspended from attending matches after they allegedly racially abused Manchester City's Raheem Sterling. A few weeks later, Internazionale fans were heard making monkey noises towards Napoli's Kalidou Koulibaly. The league announced they would have to play two matches with no supporters as a punishment.

These two incidents in major leagues suggest that racism is still a big problem in football. Things are better than thirty years ago – when black players even had banana skins thrown at them on the pitch – but are still not perfect.

Punishments too lenient

Part of the reason we still see racism in football is because the punishments are not big enough. Inter may have had no fans for two matches, but the same racist fans could still attend games after the ban. They could still see and support the team on television. The same applies to the suspended Chelsea supporters. When Russian fans racially abused French players in a friendly before the World Cup, the Russian Football Association was fined just 30,000 Swiss francs (\$41,000) by FIFA. This

was a very small cost for the Russian FA, and no supporters were banned from future games.

It is not just supporters who are not punished; some players have avoided punishment too. In 2017, a Liverpool youth player named Rhian Brewster accused a Russian opponent of racially abusing him. The investigators could not find any evidence to punish the player though. Another Spanish player was also accused of making racially abusive comments during the under-17 World Cup final, but again the investigators could not find any evidence.

However, it is not just a lack of punishments that mean supporters and players feel it is ok to treat someone differently because of the colour of their skin. Raheem Sterling bravely gave his opinion on why he thinks racist attitudes still exist in football. Writing on Instagram after the alleged abuse at Chelsea, he posted two pictures of newspaper headlines. One accused a young black player of spending too much money on a house, the other praised a young white player for spending the same amount of money on a house. Both houses were bought for the players' mothers. "I think this is unacceptable; both (are) innocent (and) have not done a thing wrong," wrote Sterling. "This young black kid is looked at in a bad light. Which helps fuel racism, an aggressive behaviour." Sterling was accusing parts of the English media for treating certain players differently because they are black. He suggested that their headlines meant fans felt it was ok to do this, too.

Racist attitudes tolerated

Racism becomes even more acceptable when the government does not do its best to stamp it out. After the Koulibaly incident, Italian government minister Matteo Salvini said he believed football matches should not be stopped when there is racist abuse. In other words, playing football was more important than ending the abuse.

What makes things even worse is that the clubs themselves sometimes have racist attitudes towards players. West Ham United sacked their head of player recruitment Tony Henry after he told an agent that he wanted to limit African players in the squad. He accused these players of having a bad attitude and causing trouble when they aren't playing. My personal experience in football tells me that Henry is not the only person with these views.

Football is still an environment where people feel comfortable being racist. The racism might not always be abuse, either. You often hear **pundits** on television talking about a black player's "pace and power", or that the player is a "beast". While these are meant to be compliments about the player, they are often just **stereotypes** used to describe black people. We should be appreciating each player for who they are, not what they look like.

Time for change

It will take some time to change these attitudes. In the short term, football clubs and governing bodies like FIFA need to be extremely harsh with punishments for fans who racially abuse players. Teams should be kicked out of tournaments and made to

play without supporters for months. Current punishments are obviously not doing enough.

Over a longer period of time though, we need to keep educating fans, players, and people working in football that racism is totally unacceptable. We should also praise players like Raheem Sterling and Rhian Brewster for speaking up about the abuse they have received. Their courage means we will continue to silence and eventually educate people who are **prejudiced**. Although there are a lot of things we love about football, recent incidents have shown there is still a dark side to the sport.



Raheem Sterling spoke up about the abuse he received as a black player.

VOCAB BUILDER

pundits (say “pan-dits”; noun) = experts who are often asked to share their opinion on a subject.

stereotypes (say “ste-rio-taips”; noun) = oversimplified ideas of types of people that may not be true.

prejudiced (say “pre-ju-disd”; adjective) = showing a dislike for someone based on insufficient or the wrong information.

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