

MILAN ES EL PEOR EQUIPO
EN EL UNIVERSO
IN WHICH THE AUTHOR HATES SOME
PLAYERS BUT DEFINITELY NOT THE GAME

Arsenal finally proves what the author has been suggesting for years.

Last year, for some weeks in January, the author of this article was enjoying a short visit to Spain where his brother was studying many broads and generally terrorizing the quaint, cobblestoned streets of Salamanca, a beautiful university town some kilometers west of Madrid. While there, I was simultaneously thrilled by the priority that were given football matches, while being appalled by the profusion of track-suits emblazoned with the logo and colors of AC Milan. Everywhere I looked, it seemed, some inestimably smarmy European youth was imitating the behavior of an adult while advertising his allegiance to a club hundreds of kilometers away and—by my objective reckoning—comprised of ancient, devious, disgusting, barbarians of football (Kaka stands as the only exception). Needless to say, my confusion at this phenomenon soon turned to rage as I struggled to communicate the plain fact—Milan is a terrible, horrible, awful football team—in plain English. In my selfless pursuit of cultural understanding, I implored my brother, fluent as he was in Spanish, to instruct me in the proper recitation of just one phrase: Milan is the worst team in Europe.

LET
THREE
PLAYERS
PLAY
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Milan es el peor equipo en Europa became my favorite Spanish phrase and quickly pushed all other, more useful and relevant, phrases out of my mind. I would say it politely to waiters and hoteliers; I would shout it to pretty girls at the *discoteque*. Its simplicity and universal truth, for me, embodied an ideal—a philosophy—as if I were storming the gates of the Bastille and yelling something in French. I was educating the masses, preparing them for the future.

I narrowly escaped from my vacation in Spain and, several months after my return, I watched in agony as Milan defeated Liverpool and won the UEFA Champion's League—thus becoming "The Best Team in Europe." Again, needless to say, I was outraged; and my ardor only grew last December as Milan beat out Boca Juniors in the final of the Club World Cup—thus becoming "The Best Team in the World."

But did my bias waiver? Did the pitch of my hatred for Milan diminish in the face of these inarguable facts? Hell No! And last Tuesday my famous axiom was absolved by Arsenal, who defeated the "reigning champions" two goals to none at the San Siro in Milan—a feat before undone by any English squad. Not only did the young Arsenal side eliminate their opponents from the European Champions League, they spent three-quarters of the match running a free-clinic for senior citizens. And Good God was it a beautiful sight! Though the Brazilian Kaka, with some help from Milan half-back Andrea Pirlo, looked sharp for the first twenty five minutes, it quickly became evident that the Italian side lacked the necessary skill and class to compete with Arsene Wenger's Arsenal. They did everything: Hleb and Fabregas' dagger passes across the top of Milan's penalty box; the uncompromising tackles of Flamini in midfield; the enthusiastic overlapping runs of Clichy and Eboue on the wings; the steadfast defending of Gallas and Big Phil Senderos; and the constant danger of Adebayor lurking uncharacteristically wide, and dragging the aged Nesta and Maldini out with him. It was a fine display of composed,

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THE NEUTRAL SUPPORTER

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR GIVES THE ALLEY FOR THE READER'S OOP

Perhaps you are the sort of neutral supporter who never finds himself bored. That's nice for you, if it's true—to live without the tedium of things like or resembling lecture classes, organizational meetings, PTO potlatches, long bus rides/commutes, what people these days are calling a “job,” or just occasional bouts of that bastard ennui. In some ways, I have thought, this might be the way to adjudge the quality of one's life—by how many hours one spends explicitly *not* engaged in these trappings of middle class living. (Stay tuned for a future installment, when I've worked this metric out more fully. Huzzah.)

For those who live without even one moment of such trouble, perhaps this article isn't for you. In such an event, skip directly to Eamon's article, a heartfelt panegyric both to English football and xenophobia. You won't be *very* sorry. If you do, however, suffer the odd hour of aimless captivity, why not take a seat next to me on this literary futon and let Uncle Carson spit at you a combination of sweet nothings and truth.

Only the most studied of *New Enthusiast* readers will recall, from our early days, a four page (!) game review we “distributed” ahead of a France-Italy Euro qualifier last September. The centerfold, so to speak, of said pamphlet offers a graphic monstrosity called “If We Had Our Druthers,” in which Eamon and I—Joel not having yet been born—in which Eamon and I offered our preferred sides (Best Elevens) for each of the footballing nations. This past week, you might have noticed, I borrowed the same phraseology—the *druthers* one, I mean—in proposing what lineup of Torino's I'd most delight in seeing. (Not that they took my advice, either, though that's not really here, and only a little there.)

It might interest the reader to know that while these *TNE*-sponsored Best Elevens have appeared in print here only twice, the composition of such schematics actually consumes quite a lot of this author's time—and most frequently that sort of time during which my body is forced, by obligation to someone who pays me money, to be present, but my mind is allowed to wander like the young William Wordsworth through the Alps of my imagination.

It's important to recognize that the purpose of this activity need have nothing to do with which lineup the neutral supporter suspects might best secure victory. A variety of pundits working in a variety of media on a variety of continents waste valuable natural resources trying to accomplish this very feat. One finds oneself asking, after having waded through the heap of this often incredibly speculative drivel, *who cares?*

The Neutral Supporter—which, by the way, remains the model of ecological consciousness—the Neutral Supporter is not concerned with such base curiosities as who will win and how they'll do it. “Let the plebs sort it out!” we say. Up here in the Club, under the influence of candlelight and piano music, of foreign tapestry and Playmobil theme kits (for the child in all of us), all action points to one distinct end: the clearest path to our own sustained and unflappable happiness. And the victory of one team or another, as the like-minded reader will agree, is only a minor factor in the sweet science of neutral support. The more important ingredients to the neutral's enjoyment—which we have discussed in these pages—are: individual brilliance, attacking play, players' commitment to victory, and finally, a team's potential for allegiance-forming. It is with these same criteria in mind, then, that the neutral should form his Best Elevens. And it is with this thought in mind that I offer below some basic guidelines for composing in this sacred, and sometimes mysterious, genre.

How to Compose a Best Eleven or, If You Had Your Druthers

1. Get Paper

*An innocent enough task, it would seem, but one made considerably sweeter when the paper in question is the back of what busy-bodies call an “agenda.” Meaning “things that ought to be done” in the Latin, this brand of agenda typically includes lists of things that, like old *Bartleby*, I would prefer not to do. Instead of raising ruckuses, though, I find it best to protest silently by making this would-be to-do list the canvas for my masterpiece.

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2. Choose a Formation

*Even as the history of soccer has seen defensive tactics take a progressively more prominent role, the Neutral Supporter has no need for modernity. What is victory when compared to exhibition! Accordingly, the neutral should choose a formation that makes people get out of their Barca Loungers (or whatever it is that Ray Hudson is going on about) and shake it like a now-discontinued Polaroid picture. I choose your everyday 2-2-1-2-2-1, with more wingmen than a Saudi prince at Mardi Gras.

3. Decide on a Player Pool

*Like snowflakes or Aerosmith videos, no two Best Elevens are exactly the same (even if they same that way at first). Perhaps, as I have in past issues of *TNE*, you are merely selecting the players you'd like to see from a given club in a given match. Perhaps you are picking your favorite Serie A team. Perhaps, if you are feeling very ambitious, you are opening up your player pool to every active player. However it is, it's important to get the players' names down on paper so as not to strain the little grey cells.

4. Decide Position Eligibility

*Michael Essien at center back? It's possible. Cristiano Ronaldo at right fullback? Less likely. As you are compiling your list of eligible players, it is important to consider what you might plug them in while still maintaining some sense of footballing dignity. For example, I have pushed the envelope recently by putting young Turk Hamit Altintop at right back for one of my Best Elevens. Still, it's not indecent—or, not as indecent as some of Valencia coach Ronald Koeman's recent formations.

5. Make It Work

*As you beginning assigning players to their positions, you might find yourself having to make minor adjustments to your formation, but this is only natural.

There. Now you have a perfectly dignified remedy to the ills of modern life. If only Morrissey had known about this, say, 20 years ago, perhaps he wouldn't have had to write all those weepy songs.

—Carson Cistulli

JOEL
STRONG
IS
BROKEN

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attacking football that was only frustrated by Milan's methodical and indefatigable defending. Finally, on eighty-four minutes, the cure for *catenaccio* came off the right boot of Cesc Fabregas, skimmed fast across the pitch, and ended up twenty-five yards away in the back of Milan's net. It was a stunning shot—unstoppable for its placement and surprise—and punctuated the sincerity of Arsenal's aspirations. Just five minutes later, speedy Arsenal substitute Theo Walcott broke down the right wing, dodged a malicious tackle, and crossed to a lonely Adebayor for Arsenal's second goal and Milan's final nail. The champion's crumpled—their decrepitude and lack of imagination bleeding out of them onto the pitch for all to see. This victory for Arsenal may be a restorative for the team, but more than anything it is vindication for this writer. Arsenal may not be the best team in Europe, or even England, but they dominated Milan easily—in Milan—by simply playing with energy and vigor and, above all else, their apparent Love of the Game. Milan, for all their title, trophies, and hair-gel-mad supporters around the world, have never once demonstrated that Love and are, therefore, inarguably *el peor equipo en el universe*.

—Eamon ffitich