

How AFC Wimbledon fans became FC Real of Madrid? It could happen, as disgruntled fans on the continent take inspiration

The recent return of AFC Wimbledon to the Football League was greeted with an air-punching fervour that went way beyond south-west London. Across Europe, in Madrid, Lisbon, Hamburg, southern Italy, Finland and elsewhere, the Dons' promotion was hailed as a victory for fan power and footballing democracy.

Both Wimbledon and the other breakaway club FC United of Manchester have become role models for fans on the continent looking to form a supporters' trust or rebuild their local side from the bottom up. Pretty much from the moment the Wombles took those first tentative steps down in the Combined Counties League, back in 2002, there was interest from overseas. Andreas Birrmeier of the Hamburg SV supporters' Club explains: "We've been following the fortunes of the two English teams for a long time and have always kept our fingers crossed for their success. We've met with people from FC United of Manchester over in the UK and here in Hamburg to learn from their experiences. Now we've got supporters in Germany contacting us, we're seen as an example of how fans can be involved in club football in this country. We've even had the European Parliament wanting our advice."

Hamburg fans have been campaigning for greater accountability within the German game, but supporters elsewhere have followed the English lead and taken full control of their clubs. The story of Beveren, the Belgian side who just a few decades ago were knocking Inter out of the Cup Winners' Cup quarter-finals, has obvious parallels with Wimbledon. Victims of an enforced merger which saw the historical club (whose old boys include Tony Tour and Emmanuel Eboué) renamed KV Red Star Waasland-Beveren, fans immediately looked to Kingsmeadow for inspiration. Tips over to the UK were arranged (although an initial fact-finding mission to SW19 had to be aborted after they were left snowed out in Dons) and a bond formed with supporters in London. Kevin Pae works at Wimbledon in an advisory role, building links with



The Dons' rapid rise has made headlines across the globe...

...not least with Beveren fans in Belgium



supporters in Europe and affirming the club's pivotal role in the establishment of an international fan-ownership movement. Lots of supporters from all over came to matches here. It's a very friendly place, fans of Beveren came by coach in March to see a match, and chat to people like Erik Smanuelsen, the CEO and Dons Trust officials.

And the work of a group of fans like Beveren's helps to inspire the groups we meet in France, Denmark, Spain, Italy, or others - and likewise, it's a virtuous circle, if you like. We're all trying to do similar things, and we all inspire each other."

Rae also works as network development manager for Supporters Direct - the body that oversees all fans' groups - which has had a European arm, with UEFA's blessing, since 2006. "Wimbledon has given people a touchstone: a set of definable values and ways of doing things - the concrete

and the less tangible - that benefit clubs, fans and hopefully the wider game long-term. If they adopt them," he says, "there is a togetherness and common experience that supporters Direct helps to share, one that has given hope to the more than 270,000 people who are members of supporters' trusts."

Nowhere is this more evident than with Italian side Ancona. The Biorcrossi were playing in Serie B last year, but mismanagement and bankruptcy saw the club starting all over again in the Italian amateur leagues. This summer they were promoted to Serie D. "The group was born in 2004, but it wasn't really until last year, when the club

was in such a crisis, that we felt ready to take that step and push for ownership," explains David Klein, the president of Sossanomonaco, a supporters' trust who port-own the Italian side. "Before then there was a lot of anger about, a feeling of helplessness, that the fans couldn't actually do anything. Both Wimbledon and FC United became a reference point for what we could achieve, though you could also look to Barça's ownership model. We've come across a long way since that public assembly in the town hall last summer, even getting into Serie D seemed impossible a year ago. But it's just the beginning."

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Inspired by their English counterparts, fans' trusts are cropping up all over Europe



- Asociacao de Adeptos Sportingistas** Sporting, Portugal
Fans of the Lisbon-based club recently met with Portuguese MPs to discuss stadium safety and other issues. Supporters have been pushing for greater involvement in the club's day-to-day running, with the support of similar groups in the UK and elsewhere.
- Asociacion Senales de Atletico Madrid Spain**
One to watch: fans recently marched through Madrid donned in green and gold in homage to Man United's anti-glazer movement, protesting against "illegitimate" shareholders of the club and heavy-handed private security at the Vicente Calderon.
- Venezia United** FRC Unione Venezia, Italy
One of Italian football's most unique clubs, Venezia have been struggling to stay afloat since they dropped out of Serie A back in 2002. Fans of the Venice side have since worked with Supporters Direct to set up a trust at the club, with the team struggling to compete in the depths of Serie D.
- HSV Supporters' Club** Hamburg, Germany
The Hamburgers' 'beef' isn't so much with HSV, more the direction German football looks to be heading, with the Bundesliga's celebrated fan democracy/Increasingly giving way to a Premier League-based model. Will be a crucial player if any breakaway clubs are formed in the country.
- Tampere Unitedin Kannattajat** Tampere United, Finland
A supporters' trust was formed after the club, who won their third league title in 2007, began to show alarming signs of financial and mismanagement - so bad, in fact, that earlier this year the club were thrown out of the Finnish FA. The rebirth starts here.