

JOEL STRONG'S AMERICA
IN WHICH THE CITIZENRY IS ALLOWED
TO SLEEP OVER FOR A NIGHT OR TWO

When I do venture into public, adoring Citizens often ask me which North American Football Club is most beloved in My America. The Citizenry is frequently surprised to learn that their leader is a nearly life-long member of Raider Nation, having sworn The Pledge at the age of 6. I assume their surprise exists for two reasons: 1) Joel F. Strong is, no doubt, a winner and clubs earning his support should be expected to win. The Raiders, however, score a 1.3 on The Winner Scale—well below Joel F. Strong's 9.6 and Tom Brady's 9.7; and 2) Joel F. Strong is very, very intelligent and it is widely understood that most Raider supporters are goons. (For those that don't already know, I am The Goons' worst nightmare: prickly wit, All-American looks and a very complex street-fighting technique.) A strain has long existed between me and The Common Man that supports The Oakland Football Raiders.

The reason I bring this up is to mention that, while my entire relationship with my beloved footballing club is one Tainted with Strain, recent developments with the team management have lifted that Strain to new heights. I've bled Silver and Black through terrible draft choices and awful coaches. But ever since owner Al Davis started using a walker, things have gone from unpleasant to unbearable. He chased out *Übermensch* Randy Moss. He signed Fat Culpepper. And now Al Davis is trying to shove The Kid Coach Lane Kiffin out the door and I don't think I can watch this anymore. It is one thing to be better than your fellow supporters. It is another thing, entirely, to discover irreconcilable differences with the very team you give nightly lovin spoonfuls to. It pains me to say this because I am not over the Raiders, but I have begun the process of seeing other teams. We just might be bad for each other, as the old Love adage goes. I haven't let the Raiders know just yet, and I would appreciate your silence on this matter, Citizens.

And while I am discussing my proverbial Wandering Eye, I think it behooves us all to discuss how One finds a New One. Like Love, where all things are fair but many are ill-advised, divorcing your beloved sports franchise to bed another should abide by similar rules to Seeing Somebody Else.

1. Family Team—Picking a team or new lover that your mom or dad really likes is a safe bet. The family friend. This is even more important if a Legal Divorce is in the cards. *Team: Denver*
2. Geography—Picking the closest team (or the closest viable lover—an office mate or a neighbor, perhaps) is often the best choice and leaves one susceptible to the least amount of criticism, since we all admire convenience. *Teams: Seattle, San Francisco, San Diego, Arizona*
3. No Rivals—While Geography reduces potential criticism, Rivalry certainly induces it. Do not choose an enemy of your current squad (or sister/best friend of your current lover). This eliminates *Seattle, San Francisco, San Diego and Denver*

This leaves The Arizona Football Cardinals—the equivalent of the chubby bar hag. I'm pretty hammered right now and she has all her teeth, but I'm going to pass. While the thought of something new is titillating, I've explored my options and I think I'm sticking with my Raiders—their shortcomings and all. Just win, baby!

—Joel Strong

THE RUMOR MILL

The New Enthusiast *has almost no space to say that the following people will be selected for new England coach Fabio Capello's first squad.*

- David Beckham, though laughably out of shape, will be given his 100th cap and, at half-time, a brand-new top-of-the-line convertible Chrysler Sebring.
- Alfred, Lord Tennyson will start in goal.
- Every person pictured on the The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover.
- And, of course, Tom Brady.

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EXALTING THE WORLD OF SPORT, CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF LEISURE
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THIS IS JUST TO SAY
IN WHICH THE AUTHOR EATS PLUMS
BOTH JUICY AND COLD

Despite claims to the contrary by *Sporting Hour* co-hosts and all-around jerks Eamon ffitch and Joel Strong, anxiety is not a problem for Carson Cistulli. Need proof? Well, first of all, consider that it's been *months* since I've suspected myself of having contracted any of the world's more exotic and fatal illnesses. Second, I've recently curbed my nervous habit of putting my finger into other people's pies, which is a real big step for me. And, finally, pretty soon, if things continue to go well, I won't have to wear the lobster bib to therapy anymore. Huzzah, indeed.

Still, despite being the picture of mental serenity—*ataraxia*, at the Club—I seem to do nothing but fret over my new project, The Neutral Supporter, both in its print and radio incarnations.

At root, The Neutral Supporter is designed for those who, like me and like Eamon and like many Americans, have no strict allegiance to any of the world's football clubs. Sure, we've all had the experience of waking up in Glasgow, Scotland naked but for an Aiden McGeady jersey—and have, because of this experience, followed Celtic with something more than a passing interest—but it's not enough to compel someone—not *this* author, at least—to wander around outside Ibrox distributing to Rangers supporters pamphlets that praise the relative merits of Catholicism.

Re-stated, The Neutral Supporter is designed for the Enthusiast who, in the absence of any rooting interest proper, has earned the right to be nothing other than, as the esteemed Galeano calls it, “a beggar for good football.” He's not a football tourist, *per se*, as that evokes images only of fanny packs and motion sickness medicines. No, he's more like Odysseus after the War, stopping in the places that interest him, and stopping for longer in the places that interest him very much, only with some vague notion that he's homeward bound. And also he has a thick beard.

In Episode 14 of the *Hour* (entitled “Hickory Dickory Dax Crum” by our resident *Übermensch*, whatever that means), I was just able—before the DJ immediately following began to play something that sounded vaguely like a truck backing up—I was just able to enumerate the four qualities which I feel are central to a neutral supporter's viewing pleasure, they being, as follows:

1. Potential for Individual Brilliance—that is, a player or players who can set the night on fire with their creativity. Examples: Cristiano Ronaldo, Leo Messi.
2. Controlled/Attacking Play—which is to say a team that attempts to score goals and also seems to have some idea of how this will happen. Anti-Examples: Kick-and-Rush football, *Catenaccio*.
3. Pretense of Victory—meaning the team/player mustn't concern him-/themselves merely with spectacle, but must also play to win. Anti-Example: Denilson is typically charged with this.
4. Potential of Ownership—because some teams—your Real Madrids, your Manchester Uniteds, your Juventi (plural!)—are so well-known and wealthy that rooting for them can feel a little bit like rooting for Bill Gates to get richer.

To which list I will now add another criterion, which I will describe merely as: 5. A Certain *Je Ne Sais Quis*—because, honestly, I don't know what.

The source of my anxiety—like all sources of anxiety, I'll state confidently for no reason whatsoever—is somewhat nebulous. Mostly, it's the knowledge that my unutterable sloth will forever prevent The Neutral Supporter from realizing its potential. Still, if pressed, I might admit that I am slightly unsure as to what *form* the Neutral ought to take. Part of this is due, I think, to the fact that watching a match is very much an end in itself. One watches in anticipation of experiencing some or all of the pleasures listed above. I, a humble wordsmith and even humbler radio presenter, am unable to compete with these sorts of joys. Perhaps, of course, a very good match report can help one to *savor* the joys of the match just having been watched, but nothing is able to describe what, for example, Maurito of Angola did recently versus Senegal (which, if you haven't seen it, you should). As soon as I attempt to describe it, I kill it. For, at their heart, these moments possess that ineffable quality of religious experience. Furthermore, Eamon ffitch's Action Recaps and Joel Strong's Americas

KEEP YOUR GAZERS OUT FOR
DIE BUNDESLIGA:
BUCH DER SCHATTEN EDITION

In the great Old World tradition of the long nap, the German people rely on six weeks of winter “Me Time” as an antidote to the overwhelming joys of football spectatorship. From mid-December until the first day of February, the citizens of that benevolent little country, and all the coaches, players, and equipment jockeys, retire to their respective woodland cottages to stoke crackling fires with freshly-kindled wood while singing the songs of their grandfathers, or simply whistling the tunes; and forgetting entirely about the rigors of intense sporting competition.

But just like that prophetic ground-hog, straight out of the frost bespeckled Pennsylvania dirt, the arrival of February and that new-Spring feeling bears with it the florid reawakening of the German football leagues—most notably the Bundesliga; the nation's pewtered top-tier.

Held prisoner in that division are such eternal talents as Franck Ribery, Lucas Podolski, “Super” Mario Gomez, Miroslav “The Kloser” Klose, Luca “Spaghetti-O” Toni, and Jan “I am a Jelly Donut” Schlaudraff, to name but a few. All of who, save Gomez, suit up in the hallowed locker room of Allianz Arena, home ground to the nation's most powerful and revered club: FC Bayern Munich, current league-leader. This is not to say, however, that the Bundesliga is a one-trick pony or even a one-horse town. In fact, the league is a many-splendored thing with no shortage of dark-horses and horses-of-another-color. In particular, keep those gazers out for the Shuttlecoque-approved VfB Stuttgart, last year's title winners and home to the aforementioned Mario Gomez. While it may be true that Stuttgart have been on what the British call “a shocking run of form” this season (they currently trail leaders Munich by eleven points and languish in eighth place), we at the home offices of the Club believe them to be the proverbial horse-in-sheep's-clothing.

Also, Werder Bremen are an exciting and unpredictable squad. Manned by the Brazilians—and Shuttlecoque favorites—Diego and Naldo, as well as the German *Übermensch* Torsten Frings, Bremen play a marauding style of football marked by rampant goal-scoring and goal-allowing (they are tied on points with Bayern but have let in thrice the amount of goals). However reckless, it makes for fine viewing and is highly recommended.

And for those with soft-hearts and wide-eyes there is always little FC Energie Cottbus, from Brandenburg, the team that plays its home matches at the Stadium of Friendship and is a perennial under-horse. Despite signing a Macedonian, a Cypriot, an Albanian, and several other players from the land of make-believe, Energie remains second from the bottom of the table.

This Friday, the first of February, the German Bundesliga will wipe the sleep from its eyes and undoubtedly yawn like a great Lusatian bison as the much-already-spoken-about Bayern Munich travel to the beautiful *Mecklenburg-Vorpommern* region of Germany to take on Hansa Rostock. Then, on Sunday morning (American time), Stuttgart and the hitherto-omitted Schalke 04 relive last year's veritable title-match; a game this writer intends to cook up with some eggs, two slices of toast, and one-half of a grapefruit.

—Eamon ffitch

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have created an intimidating precedent and have further contributed to my not insubstantial handwriting over this subject.

Which is why, after some very serious introspection—that and more than a few fingers of some great sambuca we keep on hand at the Club—which is why I've realized that The Neutral Supporter need be nothing other than a sort of weekly bulletin (a community service, really) alerting our listeners/readers to those matches in the approaching days which are most rife with potential for those qualities I've listed above. More than a look at “what's on TV,” The Neutral Supporter will be the product of the many, many, (embarrassingly) many hours I spend on Ye Olde Internet watching highlights of matches new and old, always with a view to uncovering one little diamond from substantial amounts of rough. You, reader, will be able to trust that my viewing suggestions are well-researched and will provide you with joy everlasting—or, at the very least, joy lasting-longer-than-the-average-network-television-commercial. Amen.

—Carson Cistulli