

Nostalgia drags game into the bronze age

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When Dave Mackay died this week, it was only a matter of hours before someone in Derby started the campaign for a statue to celebrate the legend. Fans of Heart of Midlothian and Tottenham Hotspur soon made their requests for a commemoration. Perhaps the venerated defender will end up immortalised in bronze three times over.

Statue-building is what we do, more than ever, in football and across sport — and what we demand, even if we never came across the hero in question. Chris Allen, the Derby County fan, who has set up a Facebook page trying to garner support for the statue is 24, not old enough to have seen Mackay manage, never mind play.

"I just thought that it would be a nice gesture to Dave's family to have something at the iPro in his memory," he said. But as well as being an admirable thought, it is a symbol of wider trends.

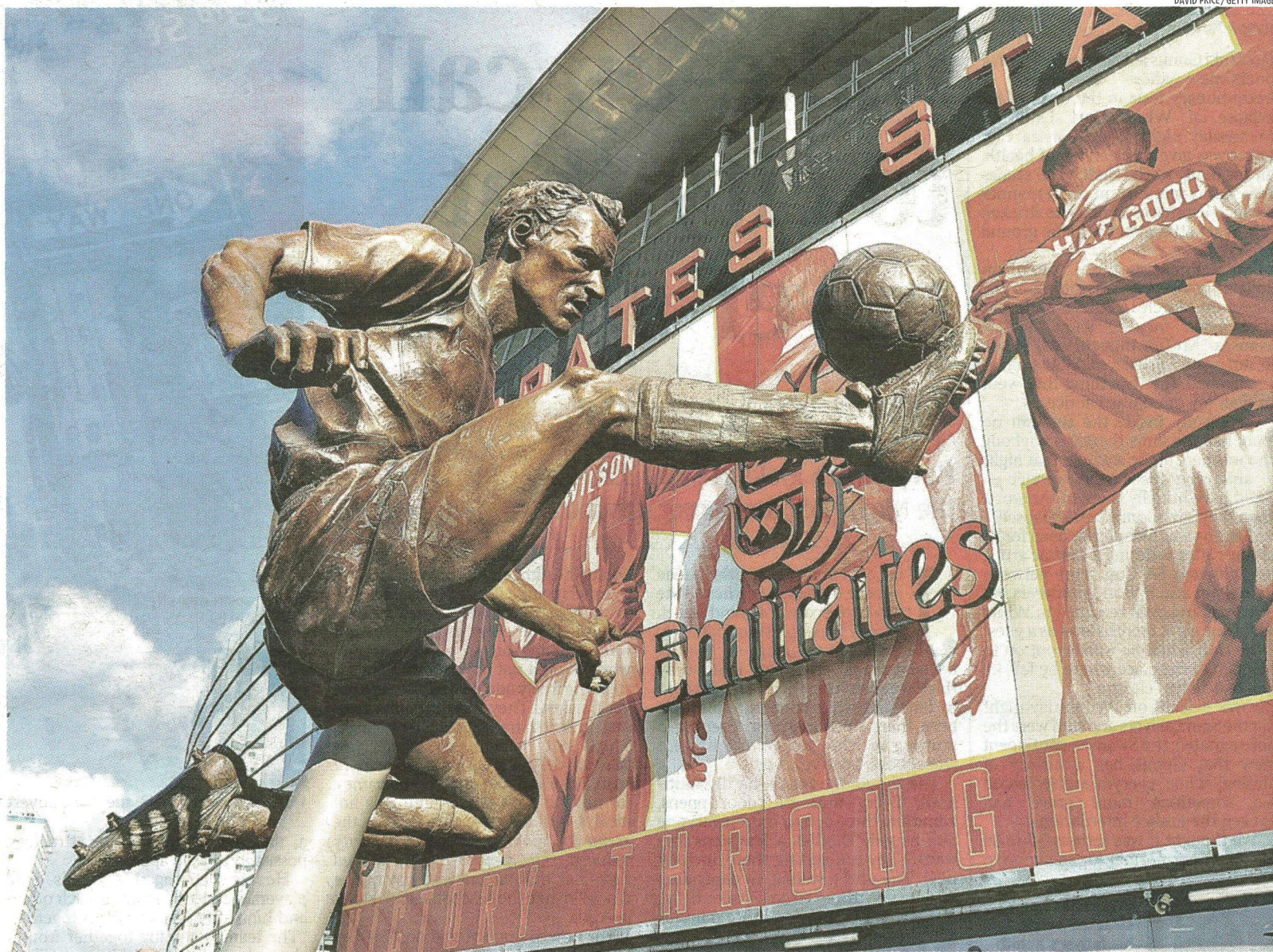
When researchers at the University of Sheffield compiled a database last year of more than 400 works commemorating footballers in 56 countries, they noted that the UK comfortably led the way with 80.

Moreover, although the study went back 100 years, they found that 95 per cent of these works had been created since 1990 and more than half in the past decade. Erecting statues to footballers is a very recent phenomenon and Dr Chris Stride, who led the team, noted a couple of key motivations.

One, as in the case of Mackay, was "a desire of fans to project their club's distinct identity in an increasingly globalised game". A reclaiming of heritage, especially at a time when football is marketed as something that began in 1992.

It is not just fans but also clubs who seek to promote and "own" the past. Stride, rightly, noted that a primary reason for so many statues springing up was "football clubs' marketing strategies based around branding through nostalgia and authenticity".

We may recoil at the idea that "authenticity" can be peddled as a marketing exercise — with us not as fans but customers — but you only have to look at any leading club and see the old players rolled out as corporate ambassadors, the former pro drawing the raffle at half-time, to realise how heritage is very much part of salesmanship. And why not,



Living legends: a statue of Bergkamp, which was erected last year at the Emirates Stadium, shows a trend to immortalise heroes who have barely hung up their boots

you might think. Why not recognise these heroes in a way that they were denied previously? The game rarely feted its legends in the "good old days".

After all, it was not until 2001 that Dixie Dean was celebrated in statue at Everton, 73 years after his 60-goal season and 21 years after he died.

It was not until 1999, decades after he perished in Munich, that the magnificent, muscular figure of Duncan Edwards was put on public display in Dudley Market Place. Only in 2011, 26 years after Jock Stein died, did Celtic erect a statue. Bill Shankly

had his gates at Anfield but it was not until 1997 that Liverpool created a lifelike image, by which time he had been dead for 16 years. Don Revie was celebrated at Elland Road in 2012.

There are many more instances of the game, civic bodies and government, very belatedly waking up to the game's old heroes.

We can see it in the new year's honours list. Remarkably — or, rather, scandalously — it was not until 2000 that half of England's World Cup-winning team from 1966 had any recognition from the establishment with MBEs. Bobby

Charlton's knighthood in 1994 was the first for a footballer for 30 years.

What changed was that football had gone safe and mainstream. For politicians, suddenly the national game did not signify hooligans but voters. Players were celebrities.

And clubs who had very often ignored their former heroes — perhaps most famously, Bobby Moore at West Ham United — were desperate to ride this wave of broadening popularity, to make money out of nostalgia.

For them, it was the perfect combination, charging top dollar for prawn sandwiches while giving the experience an "authentic" ring of heritage by inviting you to dine in the Dixie Dean lounge or Bobby Moore suite.

Statues have become a very visible part of this process. Few bothered to build them in the dilapidated stadiums of 30 years ago, but they are a perfect adornment to the new venues with their hotels and modern conference centres.

A new home can automatically have its history, such as at Cardiff City where, in 2012, they were suddenly inspired to put up a statue of Fred Keenor, the FA Cup-winning captain of 1927.

Statues seem a way of football convincing itself that, as it prepares to pay £500,000 a week to its modern stars, honestly, it has not lost touch with its roots.

They allow the game not only to do the right thing but to be seen doing

● I guess all justice systems work on some kind of moral relativism — a sliding scale of punishments ordered to fit the crime — but I am really not sure that it helps football to debate whether spitting is more or less shameful than being bitten, stamped on, abused, gouged or tickled until it hurts. It is horrible and a six-game ban seems about right, especially for full globules, but spare us the moral panic until we are in the grip of a gobbing epidemic.

the right thing, like a minute's silence for any tragedy.

The culture is so transformed that, these days, footballers have barely hung up their boots when they are turned to bronze. Tony Adams, Thierry Henry and Dennis Bergkamp are already immortalised at the Emirates Stadium. How long before you can pose alongside a bronze of John Terry at Chelsea?

Ironically in Mackay's case, he is said to have told friends that he was not keen on a statue because, as a man of action, he did not want to be remembered standing still.

No doubt, though, one of those three clubs that he represented with such distinction will commission a work. And maybe we should not worry about their motivation.

If clubs like to peddle heritage and nostalgia, it seems that we cannot get too much of it.

Rodgers already eclipsing last season's effort

Liverpool were eight points better off at this time last year, breathing down the necks of Chelsea and Manchester City. They were the story of the season, the team to watch, electrifying crowds as they chased the title.

Brendan Rodgers won the LMA Manager of the Year award, deservedly — yet we should have no hesitation in saying that, even as Liverpool sit in fifth position, his accomplishments this season comfortably eclipse that remarkable campaign.

A football sage once said that you cannot judge a manager until he has been through a storm and emerged intact the other side, and Rodgers

has done that very impressively in the past six months.

He has coaxed his team out of their crisis of confidence, and proved that it can be done with brave, adventurous football. He has weaned a team off what could have been a debilitating reliance on Luis Suárez and Steven Gerrard.

Rodgers has proved himself not only an imaginative tactician in an English game of few innovations, with his tweaking to a 3-4-3 system, but shown a faith in young players and an ability to develop them and fill them with self-belief. He is a proper coach and not every club, even top ones, can be sure they have one of those.

At 42, and without a trophy or promotion to his name, Rodgers might seem to have much to do to justify this praise, but I think enough has been seen already to be sure that he is exceptional, and not just by British standards.

One day the FA will come calling offering him the England post — and, intriguingly, Greg Dyke, the FA chairman, says he wants someone who understands English football — but that will surely have to wait while Rodgers seeks club prizes.

That may well be at Liverpool but Arsenal are also likely to see his methods as a fine fit post-Wenger. What Rodgers has done this season, as much as last, may convince them.