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He's in the Pink: Interview with Simon Kuper

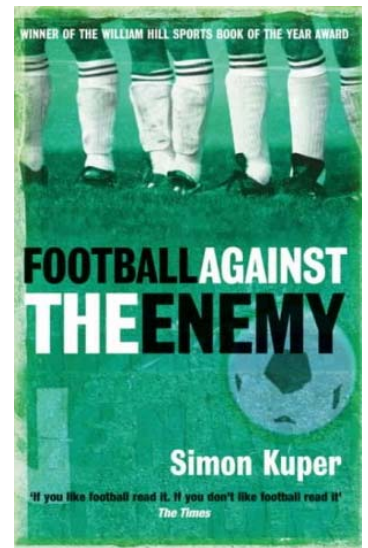
In January of this year, in belated observance of the tenth anniversary of the publication of *Football against the Enemy* (1994), we spoke by telephone with **Simon Kuper** of The Financial Times, who was in the Netherlands at the time. He portrays the volume, ranked 23rd in an *Observer* (U.K.) survey of the 50 best sports books (8 May 2005 <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/osm/index/0,7432,1476499,00.html>>), as “very much about a time” in the early 1990s, when football was less prominent and less talked about as an ingredient in a nation’s politics and culture.

Ten years later, therefore, it made little sense, Kuper said, to think about an anniversary edition, although his work can be seen as foundational for anthropological explorations of the game that were to come. The *Observer*, in its assessment, writes that “the book’s strength is Kuper’s ability to back up his central thesis—that football is the medium through which the world’s hopes and fears are truly expressed—with some impressive legwork. . . . [W]hether talking to an East German fan coping with Stasi intimidation or investigating the corruption behind Argentina’s 1978 World Cup triumph, the author never fails to convince that this truly is the game that shapes the world.” That Kuper could see football as a vessel of political and social insight helped give shape to the more recent wanderings of **Franklin Foer**, detailed in *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (2004). *Ethnographies* and first-person reporting in European broadsheets, in fan magazines such as *When Saturday Comes* (<http://www.wsc.co.uk/>) and *FourFourTwo* (<http://www.fourfourtwo.com/>) and in a growing roster of dissertations and academic articles about soccer’s cultural significance owe some debt to Kuper as an early experimenter with the genre. Kuper himself continues this work in a

weekly column in the *Financial Times* (<http://www.ft.com/>), although his attention now encompasses sports like cycling, cricket, basketball and rugby.

He returns often to football, however, as in the four excellent book-form magazines titled *Perfect Pitch*, published between 1997 and 1999 by *Headline*. In Kuper's introduction to the first issue—on the theme of “Home Ground”—he addresses the inspiration: “Surely, we thought, there was room for a *Hard Gras* (<http://www.hardgras.nl/>) in England?” referring to the literary football magazine from Holland. Alas, the project was discontinued after four issues. Kuper was editor or coeditor of all four, each sublime in its own way. Other themes are “Foreign Field,” “Men and Women” and “Dirt.” We have managed to procure all but the “Men and Women” issue through booksellers in the U.K. In 2003, Kuper wrote *Ajax, the Dutch, the War: Football in Europe during the Second World War*, published by *Orion*. It was short-listed for the *William Hill Sports Book of the Year*, an award that *Football against the Enemy* had won previously.

To write his first book Kuper traveled to 22 countries over nine months, between 1992 and 1993, on a £5,000 advance from the publisher. He was not a professional journalist and, at 23, had not completed his studies. “I began this book as an outsider,” he writes in the first chapter, “Chasing Football around the World.” “I had never sat in a press box or spoken to a professional footballer. . . . The big names scared me. Interviewing **Roger Milla**, for instance, I could barely look up from my list of prepared questions.” The advance did not go far in Western countries, and Kuper found himself staying in youth hostels. Managers and players comment on his dire straits and worry about a tear in Kuper's jacket—although some footballers thought it might have been a fashion statement—but it is these acknowledgments of self-doubt that help make Kuper's book pleasant to read.



GG: You say *Football against the Enemy* was “about a time,” but looking at the book now would you have added anything, any points of emphasis or disclaimers to what you had written?

SK: You know when I look at the book now it feels like somebody else wrote it because it was so long ago. I'm sure I would have done things differently now, although I find it hard to say exactly what. What I do think is that I couldn't have written it now because we know so much more about the world and about the football world. On the Internet you can find out all these things about clubs and about football situations throughout the world, whereas when I was going to Ukraine or Cameroon, when I tried to read about them beforehand there was really nothing to find at all. Football

“Football and politics! What an original theme!” General Enciso explained, when I told him the subject of my book. . . . In Argentina at least, it is an unoriginal theme. There, football and politics is a respected academic field, almost like particle physics or neurology.’

—*Football against the Enemy* (p. 173)

was hardly reported in the newspapers as a social or political event, so there weren't any of these long features which are now very common about the meaning of some soccer event for politics. To write the book now would be (a) somewhat pointless because the material's all out there; (b) it's now very common to take that approach so it wouldn't be worth doing; and (c) the world has become much more similar. When I went to Ukraine or Hungary these were vastly different places from say Holland or England. Now people will all watch the same football on TV so the fans are subject to the same influences. You see European Championships or World Cups they all dress the same, they paint their faces in the national flags. So their differences are much less vast. I think also because the world is much more democratic now than 10 years ago, the influence of

soccer on politics is less important than it was, although conversely it's talked about much more.

GG: *In your mind, when you started working on that first book, were you doing something new that you had not read about in other writings or works of other reporters?*

SK: I remember I once heard this radio program about the Rangers–Celtic match and the impact that had on the tensions in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants. This was on the BBC. That struck me as really interesting but I didn't know anything about it. In 1988, I was very keenly aware of the euphoria in Holland

when they beat Germany [2–1, in the semifinals of the European Championships] and how this was linked to World War II. Then you got these occasional theories that you half-heard about how Brazil winning the World Cup kept the military regime in power in 1970. So there were these little mentions here and there, but it certainly wasn't the industry it is now. As everybody always says, there wasn't much being written about football anyway in those days so there wasn't a huge body of literature to read.

GG: *Has your relationship to the game changed in the time since? Your brief with the Financial Times seems to be pretty broad, including sport in general.*

SK: For my first four years at the *FT* after I'd finished the book and I'd finished studying, '94 to '98, I wrote about economics, and I only wrote about football on the side. And then I . . . became freelance, mostly a football writer. But it is somewhat frustrating only to write about football. It gets very similar. So now I've managed to construct a life where I write about sport, and I do some non-sports articles in the *Financial Times* as well, which I'm happier with. Maybe it's true of all subjects, but if you keep writing about football, in the end you start to repeat yourself. It's very hard to have new ideas all the time. So I found that I was becoming a little bit of a broken record. I'm much more relieved now when I write, say, maybe one or two football pieces a month.

GG: *I sometimes think it's an advantage being in the U.S., because soccer seems more remote. It's not prevalent, not talked about.*

SK: In a country like England, where there is this obsessive conversation about football, you get a lot of time spent on

'[Nikolai] Starostin was the most popular footballer in the country, and in each of his gulags over the next few years the camp commander tried to appoint him soccer coach. The poet Osip Mandelstam was executed, but no one was permitted to touch Starostin. "Even inveterate recidivists would sit quiet as mice to listen to my football stories." He thinks he knows why football was so important: "For most people soccer was the only, and sometimes the last, chance and hope of retaining in their souls a tiny island of sincere feelings and human relations."'

—*Football against the Enemy* (pp. 43–44)

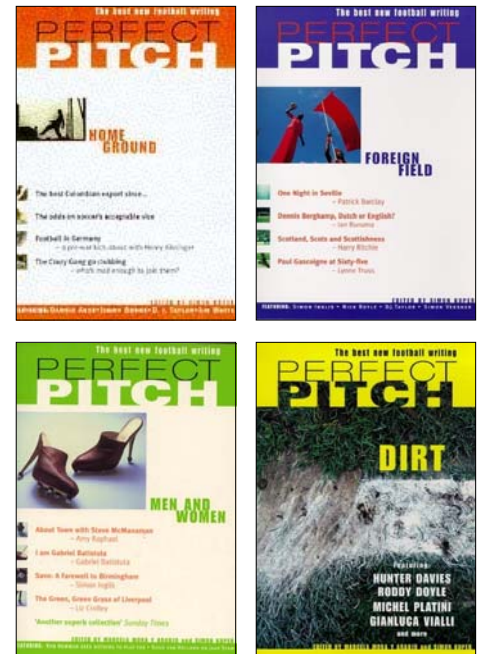
very boring things, like the latest row between [Alex] Ferguson and [Arsène] Wenger. Sometimes I'm amazed when I see the English back pages. I think, "Is that the story?" But with this obsessive interest in just getting more football material every day then everything has to be a story.

GG: You mention in your latest book about Ajax about the Dutch magazine *Hard gras*. Is there a market in that atmosphere for literary writing about soccer?

SK: In Holland there is. Holland being a smaller country, it's easier to get, say, the top novelists or poets. So you get people who have very big names here in Holland writing pieces about **Ruud Gullit** or something like that. And the reading public is very keen on that. So *Hard gras* sells, by Dutch standards, very well. I tried to do a copy of this in England for a while called *Perfect Pitch*, and that didn't do as well, partly because in England you can't get the country's most celebrated, popular novelists because they're multimillionaires. So it's hard to get them to write for a magazine like that.

I think there's a problem with football writing in that a lot of things have been done now. There've been a lot of books about "did you know that soccer has this great effect on politics or culture or on this country or on that country?" and the **Nick Hornby** approach—it worked brilliantly for him, it didn't work so well for other people. So it's becoming harder and harder to use football in a new way. *Hard gras* does have that problem to some degree. The advantage over England is that you can actually go and speak to the footballers in Holland, and they're often interesting people, unlike in England. You get the American-style, in-depth reporting that you find in good American magazines in Dutch soccer writing.

GG: I wonder if another approach may be a book like *Football against the Enemy*,



The four issues of *Perfect Pitch*, subtitled "the best new football writing" and including fiction and essays—all for the first time in English—by **Jorge Valdano**, **Jorge Luis Borges** and **Marguerite Duras**.

'Several minutes after arriving to study at a US university, I signed up for mixed soccer. Soon afterwards my team won our university's mixed soccer league. . . . So we went to New Haven to play the mixed soccer champions of Yale University. However, they weren't mixed at all. They were a team of 11 women. Just before kick-off they raised their shirts, exposing their bras, and yelled a feminist chant whose words I was unable to register.'

—Simon Kuper,
"Team-mates from Mars and
Venus," *The Financial Times*,
15 April 2005

but using women's football as a subject. Do you ever think along those lines?

SK: I think it would be interesting to see how in different countries people approach women's soccer and how that changes. I definitely think that could be a very good book. I also think there's a book to be written about American soccer culture. That would be more my sort of thing. Women's soccer somebody else should definitely do.

In American soccer culture, I think the interesting fact is that soccer has been assimilated into sort of suburban, white America as a game which people appreciate because it doesn't have the excesses of American sport, or they think it doesn't. The soccer moms are not so aware it seems of European soccer. But it's not dominated by black players from the ghetto who sometimes do bad things off the field. There aren't these multimillion-dollar salaries, it's not corporatized in the same way as the American sports. So I think soccer in America is sort of this Ben and Jerry's-style, upper-middle-class American culture which reacts against a lot of the things in mainstream American culture. It's not the only thing soccer is in America. It is so widely played and it's also an immigrant game, but I think that's part of the culture that it has there. And it's seen

as a kids' game, as a girls' game, so it's a liberal game.

GG: *I often think soccer here is ingrained in subtle ways. I grew up playing it, and probably a large percentage of kids did. Their families were involved in it, and it becomes a kind of community glue.*

SK: Glue, but for kids. I had this interesting thing in Hoboken in New Jersey last year. I went with some Dutch guys, all of us adults, to play soccer on this field that we'd rented. This woman showed up, and she said, "I'm on the local council, and my

kids play soccer here. And you adults are not allowed to play soccer here.” And she said, “And I’ll call the police.” Somebody else began shouting, “This is a field for the kids! It’s for the kids!” Which wasn’t the case; we’d actually rented it. But in their mind, that’s what soccer is, it seems to me. It’s a safe game that you want your kids to play, and it’s nice and it’s cute. Whereas to us, soccer is more what, I don’t know, what baseball is to Americans. It’s a game for kids and for adults, and it has a lot of glamour as well and these aspirations that you attach to it. And it is mainstream and it is copo-
ratized and everything. It’s a sort of rougher affair, if you like.

GG: *Back on Football against the Enemy, I had intended to ask, when you started, if you had already talked about publication and worked out your approach?*

SK: I had a contract. A British publisher [Orion] had given me a contract and £5,000, which is just enough in those days to get around the world very cheaply. My plan was always to travel around to lots of countries, but I had never really done much active journalism. I had written articles for *World Soccer* for years, but I’d sort of taken those from the Dutch press—I used to read the Dutch press and then write what they were saying. (I hasten to add I don’t work as a journalist like that anymore.) But I’d never actually gone and interviewed famous people, and the idea terrified me. So my idea was I’d go around and find articles in newspapers, and I might meet people in cafés or on the streets and I’d ask them about soccer. But I quickly realized you wouldn’t get any material that way. So I had to sort of steel myself and go and knock on the doors of football people, like managers or journalists or players even. Or often sociologists or anthropologists had the best, most interesting insights. I arrived in all these countries and had maybe a couple of phone numbers, and then I’d just knock on a lot of doors.

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GG: *What do you make of the Ajax chairman [John Jaakke] wanting to dissociate the club from its association with Jewishness?*

SK: He said it in the New Year’s speech. . . . For years the club has been some-

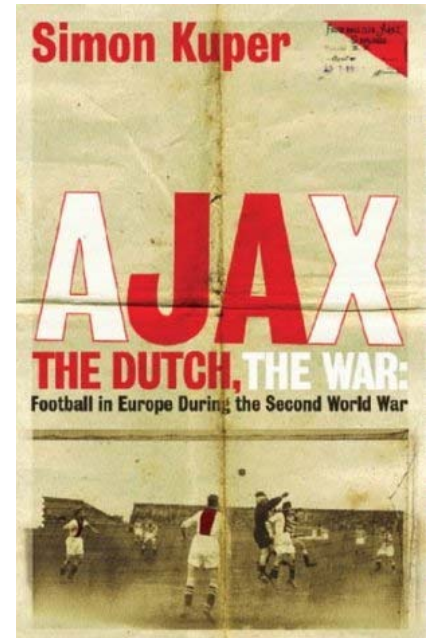
what embarrassed by the fans' shouting. It's partly because, my view is, to be associated with Jews in Dutch football is considered something shameful. I found this when I was writing the book about Ajax that the club was just terrified of anybody making that connection. You know Feyenoord (<http://www.feyenoord.nl/>) and the [ADO Den] Haag (<http://www.adodenhaag.nl/>) fans are shouting anti-Semitic chants when they play Ajax? It's really astonishing. That should be a matter of huge fame, but foreigners are mostly completely unaware of it. There's a strange debate in Holland that, in fact, it's not the Feyenoord fans' fault. It's the Ajax fans' fault, because the Ajax fans call themselves "Jews," and they shout "We are Jews! Jews are champions!"—that sort of thing. So naturally, then, the Feyenoord fans have to shout "Hamas! Hamas! Jews to the gas chamber!" Or there are other chants, because the Ajax fans have provoked them so severely. So there's a very weird debate in Holland that it's largely the Ajax fans' fault and that they have to stop, and that's what the Ajax chairman was I think getting into when he made his speech.

GG: *I wasn't aware of it happening as much with Ajax in away arenas as I was with Spurs [Tottenham Hotspur] in the U.K.*

SK: It's much worse here than it is with Spurs.

GG: *The book by Franklin Foer, How Soccer Explains the World, covers some of the same ground as you did: Ukraine, Rangers–Celtic and so on. Do you distinguish your view of the world game from his or do you agree that you can read the tea leaves of globalization in soccer?*

SK: He's writing 10 years on, so globalization is much more of a theme now than it was then. As I say, when you went to Ukraine or indeed to Glasgow 10 years ago, they were very different places. And now the world is more similar. He does use these countries—I just skimmed the book—to make particular points about each par-



Kuper's second book deals in part with the anti-Semitism of which Ajax and its supporters have been targets. Feyenoord supporters regularly make the sound of escaping gas and the Hitler salute, Kuper writes in chapter 14, "Football Songs of the Netherlands." He speaks with **Micha Gelber**, a Feyenoord fan and Jew. "Of course I experience the singing as hurtful. More hurtful would hardly be possible. But after everything I have been through I have an elephant's hide" (p. 213).

ticular place obviously. From what I saw in my brief reading there's interesting stuff in there. I don't think it's a vastly different approach to mine.

GG: *On the series Perfect Pitch, the idea of an anthology, was that intended to go longer for U.K. readership?*

SK: We were going to see, we had no idea. I just thought it wasn't going to be as huge a seller as the publisher was hoping. It wasn't really an anthology in that almost all the writing—certainly all of the English writing—was new. Some of the foreign stuff had already appeared, and we just translated it. It didn't sell enough, so it had to stop. So it only lasted four issues—somewhat to my relief, because I was doing it all in my spare time. . . . They did sell a few thousand each, nothing spectacular. And they're still, like all books, traded on the Internet. When I look back at them, I think there was some very good stuff in there as well as some not-so-good. Two of the issues appeared in 1998 and that year there were several hundred books published in England on football if I'm not mistaken. So they just drowned in a flooded market.

The HTML of this article appears at [«http://www.theglobalgame.com/kuper.htm»](http://www.theglobalgame.com/kuper.htm).