

A BREAK WITH TRADITION - Stuart Fuller remembers when half-time used to last only five minutes

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Hands up who knows what footballing event happened on Saturday 3rd March 1995 in a place famous the world over for golf? It was a change that has literally resulted in billions of pounds worth of revenue flowing into the game in some form or another. Still none the wiser? Well what if I said that it also resulted in us TV viewers being exposed to the intellect of Andy Townsend, Harry Redknapp and Alan Shearer? OK I can see you have thrown in the towel, so I will tell you.

On that blustery Saturday in the Turnberry Hotel on the Perthshire coast of Scotland, the International Football Association Board met for their annual meeting. Representatives from the four home nation associations plus the delegation from FIFA discussed a number of changes to the game. Point eight on the agenda was a proposal from the English Football Association to extend the half-time period to a maximum of 15 minutes.

Interestingly enough, the existing rule only permitted a five-minute break, unless approved by the referee. Their reason was that the change was needed to "reflect the needs of the modern game". Apart from a slight amendment from the Scottish Association, which stated that half-time could be shortened with the agreement of the referee, the motion was passed and came into effect across the world on the 1st July the same year, changing the face of the game forever.

So the first few seasons of the English Premier League were played with only a 10-minute interval, as too was the 1994 World Cup in the USA. Was that enough for players and fans?

Catering for the fans

It certainly changed the habits of the spectators in a stadium. As new grounds started to be built, more emphasis was placed on food and drink revenue, but with such a short half-time period, people didn't want to miss parts of the match and so stayed in their seats. So clubs benefited by giving fans that extra five minutes to go and queue to buy their £8 Emirates Burger or their £5 Manchester United souvenir popcorn box.

Did the teams benefit? There is a medical argument that suggests that a 15-minute "cooling-down period" after a half of football can lead to an increase in the likelihood of muscle injuries. Significant amounts of research into the human brain suggests that our concentration span is actually less than 30 seconds, so any half-time motivational talks by the managers have to be very short and very punchy. Again hardly ideal for the extended break. So who was the real winner when the rules were changed?

Simple answer - commercial television. An extra five minutes at half-time meant an additional three-minute ad break, thus doubling the amount of revenue the stations could reap. During the World Cup, this meant billions to television stations around the world. A longer break also gave the programmers an opportunity to introduce match "experts". Today we groan in disbelief as these former professionals struggle to string together a few words of interest about something that happened a few minutes ago.

Today most clubs have abandoned the idea of providing anything for the fans. Gone are the days of the Hammerettes dancing on the pitch at Upton Park in their two hundred denier American Tan tights, fake smiles and enough foundation to build a housing estate. And of course Phil Brown took

to entertaining the crowd a few years ago by doing his Hull City team talk, including flip-chart presentation on the pitch. Instead we are treated with the sight of up to eight substitutes playing keepy-uppy whilst wearing enough layers to impersonate an arctic explorer.

Scores no-more

Even the anticipation of the half time scores has gone out of the window. West Ham used to have a complicated letter grid along the side of the pitch, with each letter corresponding to a game listed in your programme. At half-time they used to put the scores up, sometimes written in chalk to "oohs" and "aahs" of the crowd. So whilst one week A may be Arsenal v Leeds United, the next week it could have been Charlton Athletic v Bury. The excitement of those few minutes. Today? Everyone has a mobile and many of us use a service such as Livescores or Footballwebpages, which gives us ridiculous amounts of information about any game in Europe. "Pepe has been sent off again for Madrid," was a comment I heard at a Lewes game last season from a bloke next to me. Really? Does anyone really care?

'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' is not a maxim that applies to football, so it was no surprise that a motion was included on the agenda for the IFAB to extend half-time to 20 minutes in recent years. The reason given was that "the walk from and back to the field of play can take players and match officials much of the current 15-minute half-time interval".

What a load of rubbish. Which stadiums locate their dressing rooms so far away that it takes that long to get back to them? The reason is simply more money. More money spent on the clubs food and drink and, of course, more money in advertising. Sponsorship analysts have calculated ITV's advertising take at the last World Cup to have been at least £300,000 a minute, rising to £1m for England games. Easy to see who the winner would be for a longer break.

The motion was not approved, but based on the fact it has now appeared on the agenda twice in the past five years, it is only time before it is.

So what would the consequence be for the average fan in the ground? Twenty minutes is a long time to be unamused for. Clubs will need to come up with more ideas to engage with their customers, something they have failed to do for well over a decade. When the product on the pitch is poor, the last thing the fans want is an extended period of boredom, but then again when was the last time the fans had any say in the running of today's game?