The predominant narrative of the modern football supporter paints us all as one club obsessives, but for many of us that all-encompassing obsession can be complemented with a number of "soft spots" for other clubs as well.

When the subject of allegiance came up in my formative football education, I chose to read from a very outdated syllabus. Unlike my 1980s school peers, I shunned the 'big five' to follow sides from England's lower divisions. On a given day, I could arrive in the playground wearing a Kidderminster Harriers cap or a Brighton & Hove Albion scarf. To some friends, this overt polygamy was anathema. As a fan of football, rather than a football fan, I wasn't constrained by such tribal sensibilities. I soon found myself looking out for the results of a wide range of clubs and for a wide range of reasons.

Family connections were responsible for some affinities. Holidays in Colwyn Bay fuelled a fondness for the North Walian side. And frequent trips to my seafaring Grandparents in Suffolk were synonymous with reading Felixstowe Town articles in the East Anglian Daily Times while everyone else watched *Howards' Way*. Around this period, I wrote to hundreds of teams in England, Wales and Scotland requesting memorabilia. Dartford, then of the Southern League, replied with a six-page hand written letter from the 'secretary and tea lady' thanking me for getting in touch, along with autographs and a bundle of programmes. It ensured them a permanent place in my affections. So much so, that when *the Darts* lost their ground and withdrew from the pyramid in 1992, I felt a genuine sense of sorrow.

What really piqued my emotions though, were team names. The more obscure, the better. On certain magical Saturdays, the Grandstand vidiprinter would churn out results from the early rounds of the English and Scottish Cups. Alongside Manchester United and Liverpool, appeared Gala Fairydean, Civil Service Strollers and Billingham Synthonia. It was a rare portal into a fascinating word, long before the internet shined a light on football's darkest recesses. I developed attachments to a raft of new clubs that in some cases have stayed for life. What I couldn't ascertain was how widespread this phenomenon might be. Was I just a bit odd? Or were kindred spirits lurking out there? So a few years ago, after the topic unexpectedly arose during an animated pub debate, I posted a message on a forum to see if anyone else had soft spots for random teams. The response was life-affirming.

Among the predictable explanations – "my Dad was born in the area", "a family member had trials" – were some fabulous rationales. A Hibernian fan liked Bangor City because he managed them to multiple title wins on Sensible World of Soccer, while a groundhopper from Kent was fond of Ebbsfleet United as he drove past their ground to go fruit picking. Using a more mathematical approach, a Bristol City follower compiled a list of clubs in the top eight tiers of English Football and ordered them in distance of where he lived. Blyth Spartans were the furthest away. He has looked out for their results ever since. Outside of Great Britain, a few people expressed sentiments for Melbourne based Dandenong, a regular feature of the Sunday papers' Australian Pools Coupon that signalled that start of a long and barren summer. "To pass the time during the close season, you also needed an Australian team and I plumped for Dandenong." says a Brentford supporter. "I liked the name. Well, who wouldn't?"

Although most of these affiliations involve little more than a cursory glance at the relevant fixture lists, some fans take their interest to another level. A good friend of mine who loves Tranmere Rovers and steak in equal measure, has an ongoing affair with Cowdenbeath based on their name resembling cow-then-beef. After receiving a Blue Brazil scarf one Christmas, he made a pilgrimage from Sheffield to their Central Park home in Fife, a round trip of nearly 600 miles. As admirable as this dedication is, it does have drawbacks.

Names are a major reason football fans develop soft spots for other clubs. They can be amusing, unusual or have personal significance. In my overactive mind, names conjure powerful connotations that seldom bear

the scrutiny of reality. Recently, I discovered Shepshed Charterhouse FC weren't, as I had once envisaged, imbedded in the rich top-hatted history of a public school, but named after Charterhouse Holdings, a garment manufacturer in the East Midlands. It was an illusion-shattering blow. Football forms part of an increasingly homogenised Huxleyan landscape. Sports shops stock the same narrow range of replica shirts. New grounds are engineered to look identical. Imagination offers refuge from this monotony. I've always pictured Highland Leaguers Inverurie Loco Works playing next to a siding full of vintage trains at the foot of a snow-capped mountain. It makes the idea of the club very appealing. Part of me would like it to stay that way forever.

Then again, in worryingly unreal times, there is a strong case for casting off the shackles of fantasy and seizing the moment. So next year, I've promised myself a trip to the emotive sounding Forres Mechanics, a boyhood favourite. I doubt I'll find philanthropic industrialists or scholarly men discussing vehicle maintenance in the damp embrace of a glen. But this doesn't really matter. We increasingly conduct ourselves through a masked medium of online monikers that force us to construct an imagined world. Life shouldn't be that impersonal. Sometimes it's nice to put a face to a name.

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The original version of this article appeared on http://twohundredpercent.net/

Note to editors:

- Mike is Campaign Manager for Non-League Day. This year's event takes place on 13th October. http://www.nonleagueday.co.uk/

- You can follow Mike on Twitter: @mike_bayly

- Mike is working on a new book about Britain's favourite football grounds. Release date is scheduled for late 2018/early 2019. More information can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/100GroundsProject