

Psychology Theory explained by Football – 1. Existentialism by Stuart Fuller (@theballisround)

Denmark is currently viewed by many as the capital of cool, regularly topping the “happy nation” charts and being the origin of the term “hygge” or living comfortably. It is also the home of the theory of Existentialism, created by Dane Søren Kierkegaard, who whilst he died two decades before the creation of Københavns Boldklub, Continental Europe’s oldest club, was a massive fan of the game.

The Dane created the theory which said in the most basic terms “Be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite of despair”, a maxim that is used throughout football today. Kierkegaard’s book, ‘The Sickness Unto Death’ could have been written by a Spurs fan who really understand what the word “despair” really means. He described several levels of despair, the lowest and most common is the realisation that despite how bad things appear at The Emirates, when the two teams meet head to head, Arsenal will undoubtedly end up on top. Kierkegaard summarised that the Spurs fan isn’t really despairing that his side have lost to their biggest rivals but that he chose to be a Spurs fan in the first place.

Every football fan suffers despair now and again – some clubs more than others. Whilst many fans will feel that disappointment is part and parcel of being a fan, many fans emotional engagement in their team has been heightened by the pressures of the modern game with Social Media and 24 x 7 live TV coverage giving everyone a voice and an opinion. That constant focus leads to cycles of peaks and troughs in terms of pleasure in supporting a team. The media tells fans how they should feel at every point, which impacts those levels of despair even further. Kierkegaard’s view of the world couldn’t be further from the reality of the ‘hygge’ world that the Danes are more famous for today.

Kierkegaard offered a solution in his theory for fans such as the Spurs supporters. He concluded that a fan can find peace and inner harmony by finding the courage to be his own true self rather than wanting to be someone who he really isn’t. In other words, football fans should stop following the herd and find another club where the game can be enjoyed rather than fear as to the reaction of others if they lose. The number of fans who have abandoned a Premier League or Championship team in favour of a Non-League club is growing season by season – this is down to the theory of Existentialism or the fact that despair evaporates when fans stop denying who they really are and attempt to uncover and accept their true motives for following football.

Kierkegaard may not be viewed in the same way as Rimet, Rous or Ramsey in the corridors of football but his theory certainly explains some of the actions of fans today who are leaving the sanitised world of the Premier League for the green and pleasant lands of the Non-League game.