Racisms, resistance and new youth inclusions: the socio-historical development and shifting focus of Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic football clubs in Leicester

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Racisms, resistance and new youth inclusions

The socio-historical development and shifting focus of Black and Minority Ethnic football clubs in Leicester

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Introduction

Research into ‘race’ and football in England has largely focused on the elite echelons of the professional game and has sought to identify and explain the incidence of overt and more institutionalised racisms and their impact on shaping the parameters of inclusion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities in the game as players, coaches, spectators and in terms of the administration and governance of the sport. In contrast, issues of ‘race’ and amateur football has been a largely under-researched and relatively marginalised area of academic focus. This chapter will seek to shift academic attention towards the amateur tiers of the game by offering an analysis of the socio-historical and cultural significance of BME clubs in the city of Leicester in the East Midlands of England, and will examine their shifting function as facilitators of structured youth football provision and their problematic relationship with local football governance to this end.

The chapter will begin by examining the existing academic literature on ‘race’ and amateur football before moving on to provide some local contextual background with regard to the particularities of the social, cultural and political landscape of Leicester. The chapter will then contextualise the socio-historical development and ongoing reality of BME clubs as sites of active resistance to racisms and as symbols of positive cultural identity production and will illustrate further the ongoing cultural appeal of clubs of this kind to BME participants. The chapter will then examine the purposeful and shifting focus of BME clubs from male adult leisure spaces to deliverers of multi-ethnic service provision for local youth populations and will the evaluate efforts of BME clubs to build increased coaching and infrastructural capacity to this end. Finally, the chapter will argue that the hegemonic whiteness and defensive protectionism embedded within demographic make-up and operational practices of local administrative football governance has undermined the pace of BME club development and has limited the more general sense of cultural belonging within the sport amongst local BME communities.

The empirical findings referred to throughout this chapter are drawn primarily from a two-phase study of player, workforce and club development in amateur football in Leicestershire conducted by the author between February 2006 and September 2006. Phase-one of the study involved a questionnaire based survey of all amateur football clubs affiliated to the Leicestershire and Rutland County Football Association (LRCFA) playing competitive football within organised league structures and yielded
completed responses from a broadly representative sample of 246 clubs: a 38% response rate. Phase-two of the study involved conducting more focused semi-structured interviews with club ‘workers’ at 10 case study amateur football clubs with a strong geographical and cultural connection to the city of Leicester, including five clubs where the majority of players, coaches and management committee members were drawn from BME backgrounds. The findings presented in this chapter also draw on the authors significant ethnographic experiences of local football governance infrastructures and operational practices at BME clubs, ascertained through previous PhD and funded research collaboration, through a longstanding involvement in a local football-based anti-racism forum and through regular presence at a range of local community and football events at which representatives from BME clubs were often present.

The term Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) is used throughout this chapter as a broad descriptive marker to refer primarily to non-white communities, inclusive of indigenous and more recent in-migrant populations to Britain. The term is commonly employed in public policy, voluntary services and the social sciences in Britain and also in research examining ethnicity and sport (Long et al 2009). In the context of this Leicester-based study the term BME is most likely to refer people of African, African-Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi heritage and people of dual-heritage (see section below: the local context) and does not include White European or White Irish in-migrants whose participation in amateur football was outside of the initial focus of this research. Further, the terms ‘Black’ and ‘Asian’ are also used to denote further ethnic sub-division of people of African and African Caribbean origin (‘Black’) and those drawn from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi (‘Asian’) communities. The intention here is to provide a series of useful (albeit, conceptually limited) explanatory markers of ethnic identity through which to examine the experiences of BME clubs in the local game. It is to an examination of the wider literature on ‘race’ and football in England to which the chapter now turns.

**Previous research on ‘race’ and amateur football in England**

Whilst the academic focus on ‘race’ and professional football has generated a significant body of research identifying the multiplicity of ways in which racisms have impinged upon and been generated by professional football culture, conversely, issues of ‘race’ and amateur football has remained an under researched and relatively marginalised area of academic study. This is especially surprising given the
high levels of BME recreational football participation and the likelihood that many of the factors shaping the parameters of inclusion and exclusion of BME communities in the professional game are probably also being 'played out' at the amateur level of the sport. This is especially the case in terms of the incidence of overt and more subtle, nuanced and codified expressions of racisms which are intended to reify and conflate cultural difference and which mark out some contingent boundaries of cultural inclusion in the sport (Back et al 2001). For example, research focusing on the amateur game West Yorkshire (Long et al 2001) and Leicestershire (Bradbury 2002) revealed the continued incidence of racist behaviour and some ongoing racialised tensions between players (and supporters) of different ethnic backgrounds. Both studies also identified tendencies towards the negative conceptualisation of BME (especially Asian) players in terms of imagined physiological, psychological and cultural inadequacies in ways which share similarities with processes of stereotypification utilised by coaches and talent scouts at professional clubs and which have contributed to the continued under-representation of Asian players in the professional game (Bains 1995, Burdsey 2007).

Findings reported in the geographically focused studies of Long et al (2001) and Bradbury (2002) echoed the broader concerns outlined in the Football Task Force report 'Eliminating Racism from Football' (1998) regarding the extent of - and the lack of effective action against - racism in the amateur game and the unwillingness of County Football Associations (CFA’s) to develop more progressive relationships with BME clubs. The recent work of Lusted (2009) is particularly instructive in illustrating the marked resistance of CFA’s to engage with broader (national FA) race equality initiatives and has argued that this institutional insularity is underpinned by a series of historically embedded and deeply conservative (and colonialist) ideologies and by the relatively autonomous organisational practices of local football governance. Findings here draw interesting parallels with research which alludes to processes of institutional closure apparent within national football governance and at professional football clubs and the relatively limited effectiveness of local, national and political initiatives designed to encourage more equitable change in this respect (Bains 2005, Bradbury 2001, 2006, CRE 2004, IFC 2003, King 2004).

Racisms and embedded processes of racial exclusion in amateur football in England have not gone uncontested. The ethnographically focused work of Westwood (1990, 1991) and Williams (1994) in football, and Carrington (1998, 1999) in cricket have all illustrated the social and cultural significance of BME clubs as sites of resistance to
white sporting hegemonies through their role in offering increased opportunities for BME sporting participation within culturally distinct and discursively constructed ‘black’ (male) spaces. From these perspectives, BME clubs are positioned as a key sporting and cultural resource for BME communities which enable the positive construction and expression of specific ethnic, cultural and neighbourhood identities. It argued further that clubs of this kind constitute a form of community politics since they provide physical and symbolic space in which BME empowerment is realised through the positive endorsement and celebration of sporting achievements and victories against perceived historical oppressors. The recent more expansive work of Burdsey has also located the significance of (male) amateur clubs of this kind in terms of their function in ‘facilitating contingent cultural integration and circumventing the normalisation of whiteness in mainstream amateur football structures’ (Burdsey 2006: 477). Further, the recent contribution of Scraton et al (2005) and Ratna (2007) in examining the experiences of BME females in amateur football has helped to broaden debates to incorporate themes alluding to intersectional exclusions and has offered a much needed and important analysis of women’s interwoven experiences of racial and gendered inequities at the grassroots level of the sport.

Central to the developing research focus on ‘race’ and amateur football has been a renewed emphasis on prioritising the experiential knowledge, attitudes and opinions of BME footballers and football ‘organisers’ whose sporting encounters have largely been mediated through their longstanding involvement in BME football clubs. Such approaches are designed to centralise the ‘authoritative narratives’ of BME research participants and intend to help overcome the prior silencing and ongoing marginalisation of BME sporting communities. It is the contention here that such narratives are arguably better understood with reference to the locally grounded contexts from which they have emerged. To this end, it is towards providing some contextual background to the local racial demography and political and cultural structure of the city of Leicester to which this chapter now turns.

**The local context of Leicester**

Over the last fifty years the provincial city of Leicester in the East Midlands of England has undergone a dramatic social and cultural transformation and has experienced successive waves of in-migration from the ‘new commonwealth’ including, most notably, the significant influx of East African Asian communities fleeing social, economic and political persecution in Uganda and Kenya in the late
1960s and early 1970s. By 2001, Leicester’s more generationally embedded and increasingly diverse BME communities accounted for more than one-third (36%) of the city’s 280,000 strong residential population and included longstanding Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean communities and newer Black African, Kurdish, Iraqi and asylum and refugee groups. Whilst more than four-fifths (83%) of the local BME population are (mainly Indian heritage) Asian, the city has also attracted significant numbers of in-migrants from central and eastern Europe over time, including Polish, Ukrainian and Serbian émigrés in the immediate post world war two period, refugee communities fleeing the war torn Balkans region in the 1990s, and more recent economic in-migrants from a range of post 2004 EU accession countries.

The operation of some racially closed practices of public sector housing allocation in the 1970s and the preference amongst former ‘new commonwealth’ communities towards accessing affordable private sector housing proximate to developing familial, social and economic support networks has led to the residential concentration of Black and Asian communities in specific locales to the immediate north and east of the city’s commercial centre (Singh 2005). The racial demographic of these locales contrasts sharply those homogenously and culturally white public sector housing estates which occupy points to the south and western periphery of the city boundaries and which feature prominently on national measures of social and economic deprivation (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2004). However, in a significant cluster of other districts in Leicester there is a much less rigidly defined and more fluid racial and socio-economic. These more ‘multi-ethnic’ districts are resident to more culturally diverse BME and white populations and feature of Leicester’s fast growing and relatively youthful ‘dual-heritage’ population.

Over the past thirty years, the city of Leicester has slowly developed an international public image as a relatively successful ‘multi-cultural’ city where ethnic diversity in commerce and social life are positively promoted and valued, as evidenced in the very public celebrations of BME religious and cultural festivals and the steady development of a strong equal opportunities culture in employment – especially in the public sector - and in terms of political representation. The initial driving force behind this ‘success’ was the emergence of a powerful radical left ruling group within the local Labour party in the late 1970s and 1980s which aggressively pursued a series of racial equality policies designed to impact positively on the way in which local government infrastructure connected with - and delivered services to - the local BME
population. This leftist political commitment (and political expediency) strongly cemented the power base of Labour in key ward areas of the city and has allowed the local authority in particular to assume a powerful and pivotal position as the key facilitator of issues of ‘diversity management’ in ways which have arguably prevented the kinds of community dissonance and resultant violent disturbances experienced more recently in the former ‘mill-towns’ of the north west of England (Singh 2003).

It is probably the case, too, that the steady transformation of Leicester as a so-called ‘model’ of multiculturalism has been assisted by the diversity of occupationally based identities in the city and by the social class and cultural backgrounds of Leicester’s key minority groups. This is most apparent with reference to East African Asian ‘twice migrants’ whose significant pre-existing and transferable entrepreneurial acumen has helped establish a thriving Asian business community in the city with an emphasis on a range of local, national and trans-national service provision. The relative stability of the local economy over time in Leicester has also arguably promoted the process of integration and local acceptance rather more than has been the case in some other post industrial towns in England where the impact of industrial recession has been felt more strongly and where historically embedded and rigidly defined ‘local structures of feeling’ (Williams 1977, Taylor 1996) have contributed to shaping more polarised versions of local ‘race relations’.

However, it is also important to recognise that behind the very positive public image of ‘multicultural Leicester’ there exists some very real inter-ethnic tensions between different BME groups and a significant continuation of openly expressed racist sentiment in largely white enclaves both in the city and in those wider county locations which remain relatively untouched by patterns of ‘new commonwealth’ immigration. Further, it is probably also the case that the complex interplay between processes of institutionally enforced separation and voluntary cultural self segregation has reduced the potential for – and realisation of - a more conjunctive co-existence between some BME and White communities in specific locales. It is against this complex and constantly shifting local cultural and political landscape that the lived experiences of Leicester’s diverse local communities has been ‘played out’ in the local societal and sporting arena. It is towards the main findings of the study to which this chapter now turns.
Levels of BME participation in the local game

Initial survey findings revealed relatively strong levels of overall representation of BME players (14.9%) at amateur football clubs in Leicestershire: a figure broadly proportionate to 2001 Census data for the BME population resident across the region (15%). However, this overall figure disguised strongly differentiated patterns of participation across axis age, gender, ethnicity and religion. For example, whilst more than one-in-five (21%) male youth players at clubs were from BME backgrounds, BME male adult (11%), female adult (9%) and female youth players (9%) were all under-represented in proportion to their representation in the local population (15%). Further ethnic sub-division revealed a strong representation of black players within each of the above sectors of the local game. In contrast, Asian participation was a markedly male phenomenon. Within this latter cohort, Sikh communities featured especially strongly as male adult players whilst Asian youth participation was much more likely to include players from more religiously diverse backgrounds. Survey findings also drew attention to the more general under-representation of BME qualified coaches (10.2%) and management committee (6.3%) at clubs in Leicestershire. Findings here were also similarly marked across key intersections of gender, ethnicity and religion. Almost all BME coaches and management committee members were male and most were drawn from Black Caribbean and Asian Sikh communities.

Survey findings also indicated a strongly clustered concentration of BME players, coaches and management committee members at just five clubs situated in the city of Leicester. In total, these five clubs accommodated 790 registered players of which 86.8% were drawn from BME backgrounds: more than one-third of BME male adult (36%) and two-fifths of BME male youth players (40%) participating in the game at all clubs across Leicestershire. Further, almost all coaches (89.2%) and management committee members (98.2%) at these five clubs were from BME backgrounds: more than two-thirds (67%) of the total BME ‘workforce’ involved in clubs across the region. The relative absence of opportunities for female participation as players or as part of the ‘workforce’ at BME clubs was notable. Clubs of this kind were clearly a ‘male space’. Nonetheless, these five clubs featured offered significant opportunities for male adult and male youth football provision, hosting 10 male adult teams, 24 ‘full-sided’ male youth teams and a further 25 ‘mini-soccer’ boys teams.
There was significant heterogeneity between - and in some cases within - these five BME clubs in terms of the dominant ethnic and religious demographic of participants and the assumed cultural identity of clubs. Whilst one club exhibited a longstanding cultural connection to local Black Caribbean communities, the other four BME clubs drew mainly on participants from Leicester’s diverse Asian communities. Here, there was a clear split in terms of the dominant religious affiliation of participants and the identities of clubs, incorporating two Sikh clubs, one Hindu club, and one Muslim club. In the latter case, almost two-thirds (64%) of all young Muslim males playing the game at clubs across Leicestershire were doing so at this one club. However, the religious make-up of players at this particular club (which focused solely on youth provision) arguably resulted less from any overt forms of religious identification on the part of the club (in contrast to, for example, Leicester’s two Sikh clubs) and was much more informed by some geographically specific and politically conscious recruitment processes targeting young players in some of the most deprived wards in Leicester, which featured significant Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Somali communities. It is towards a more contextualised and layered account of the socio-historical development and shifting operational function of these BME clubs to which this chapter now turns.

Resisting racisms and promoting positive cultural identities at BME clubs

The socio-historical development of BME football clubs in Leicester (and in other locales in Britain) cannot be divorced from the national political context surrounding ‘new commonwealth’ in-migration to Britain and the prevailing climate of racial politics within which societal and sporting relations have been ‘played out’ at the local level. In Leicestershire, as in other major towns and cities in England in the 1960s and 1970s, rapidly changing local racial demography’s engendered significant expression of resentment and hostility on the part of indigenous White communities towards newly arrived and recently settled BME communities. These wider societal racisms and embedded oppositions to racial integration were especially evident within the culture and practice of amateur football in Leicestershire, where club affiliation was (and, often, still is) deeply rooted within heavily masculine and homogenously White neighbourhood and kinship networks. These socially constructed patterns of organisation embedded within pre-existing amateur football networks contributed significantly to shaping the initial parameters of inclusion into – and exclusion from - the local game amongst young BME males and acted in part as an accelerant
towards the formation of clubs from within BME social networks and local cultural institutions.

‘Traditionally, there’s never been much access for Asian people getting into White teams. It limited a lot of players in terms of where they could play and a lot just dropped out. But there was a firm interest in football amongst young people, attached to their sort of gangs, you know, or the Sikh temples and Hindu temples and so on. That’s how it all started’ (Club Secretary, BME club)

Beyond the historically embedded processes of racial closure alluded to above, the historical and ongoing experiences of BME clubs has also been strongly mediated by the relatively widespread incidence of overt forms of racist behaviour emanating from opposition players, coaches and spectators. Interviewees below allude to the commonality of targeted racist expression within the adult and youth sectors of the local game and reference the broad generational cohorts and the distinct local geographies from which such racist behaviour has regularly emerged:

‘At youth level, I do not believe it has changed in 25 years. Our juniors still experience racist, prejudice remarks and comments from the opposition’ (Committee member, BME club)

“We’ve had a group of supporters behind the goal shouting “Get on with it, Nigger, You fucking Paki’ and so on. It’s probably more [the] spectators than players, parents as well as young people. It happens more when we’ve played out of town, even more abuse there than when you play in the White inner city areas’ (Club Secretary, BME Club)

Some interviewees also alluded to the more recent practice of a much more subtle, nuanced and codified form of cultural racism, which is designed (and understood) to mark out some contingent parameters of belonging and cultural inclusion within local football and, concomitantly, within local societal relations:

‘More recently, opposition players have been derogatory and flippant about people’s cultural background, about cultural modes of dress and behaviour patterns. Really demeaning and derogatory behaviour. When
you have black players involved they [white players] have that condescending tone’ (Committee member, BME club)

Whilst the perception of racism on the part of those who witness or experience it as such is not a necessary of sufficient condition of its existence, it is important to locate the interpretation of its meaning within the contextual layers and local settings in which these racialised actions are performed and acted out (Long and McNamee, 2004). In this respect, the behaviour referred to above might be read as a distinctly situated and consciously strategic response by White players designed to reify cultural difference and encourage racialised antagonisms in ways which offer symbolic opposition to notions of ‘progressive’ multi-cultural Leicester as embodied within the dominant demographic make up and (multi) cultural identities of BME clubs. Against this backdrop BME clubs were conceptualised as sites which enabled physical solidarity and collective safeguards against the prevalence of racisms within the local game. The realisation of positive group protection was especially marked at BME clubs which recruited players from districts experiencing disproportionate levels of social and economic deprivation and which conveyed distinct sporting representations of multi-ethnic neighbourhood nationalisms premised on the complex interplay of ‘race’, class, locality and the physical performance of youthful masculinities.

BME clubs also performed an important socio-cultural function for their constituent communities in Leicester. In particular, these clubs occupied a discursively constructed and distinctly racialised ‘symbolic space’ within which the positive endorsement and celebration of BME sporting (and societal) achievement can be read as a form of cultural resistance to white sporting hegemonies and wider societal racisms (Westwood 1990, 1991, Williams 1994, Carrington 1998, 1999). From this perspective, BME clubs have come to represent a highly visible cultural resource within which active participation has helped facilitate processes of (contingent) cultural inclusion whilst enabling the positive construction and expression specific ethnic, cultural and religious identities. The interviewee below offers a powerful analysis of the initial symbolic function and ongoing cultural relevance of BME clubs in Leicester which conjoins notions of community collectivism with cultural identity production:

‘It’s about the ability for ‘black’ people to mobilise themselves and to say to the wider world ‘look, we can organise ourselves, we can bring about
equality and self-improvement’. These clubs set themselves up to create their own identity to establish themselves as a force and to continue that sort of common purpose. ‘Black’ people need to have that identity, and all these clubs identify with a specific identity, you know, religious, cultural, a common identity for the community’ (Vice-Chair, BME club)

The identifiable (and identifiably different) social, cultural and religious attachments of these local sporting institutions were understood by interviewees to have informed the initial participation trajectories and sustained organisational commitment of BME participants. This was especially the case at those Asian clubs which had strong developmental connections to specific religious places of worship and which offered opportunities for familial and cultural continuity and faith-based socialisation. However, whilst the strongly religious identities of Asian (especially Sikh) clubs had arguably strengthened the cultural and generational bond between existing club members and has provided an important and historically consistent conduit into the local game for key marginalized communities, clubs of this kind probably have relatively limited wider appeal to potential players and club ‘workers’ from other religious or more secular backgrounds. It is probably also the case, that the continuation of some deeply embedded racist sentiment and residual cultural stereotypes within local White communities has further gravitated against greater sporting integration in this respect.

At other BME clubs there was a strong emphasis on providing an ideological and physical space in which the promotion of new, youthful, multi-ethnic identities was positively encouraged and endorsed and which reflected a wider ethos of multi-cultural service provision for disenfranchised communities, that includes - and goes beyond – football provision. These tendencies were most pronounced where targeted recruitment processes focused on attracting ethnically diverse players with a strong connectedness to the everyday lived experiences of some spatially focused urban settings in Leicester. The interviewee below articulates further the consciously constructed multi-ethnic identities and cultural appeal of clubs of this kind:

‘I think a lot of people like to play for [the club] because it gives them self worth and it’s not just about football, it’s about family, people unifying themselves, the different races, the different cultures. But that’s what we aim to do, give hope basically, you know, to people who may not be able to go to any other club and just walk in there, we develop the person and
we give everybody an opportunity. We aren’t selective like other clubs’
(Vice-Chair, BME club)

The above comments also allude to the deeply intentional socialistic philosophies at some BME clubs and the broader political project of enabling racial integration and community cohesion and increasing the social and sporting capital of marginalised youth communities. It is towards an analysis of the shifting focus of BME clubs towards enabling increased participation in the sport amongst youth cohorts to which this chapter now turns.

**Shifting focus from adult to youth participation at BME clubs**

The BME clubs referred to in this chapter were each formed between 1968 and 1979 and have since provided an important conduit into the local football scene for adult males from families of first and second generation in-migrants from the ‘new commonwealth’. Many of these early participants have exhibited a significant and sustainable organisational commitment to these clubs over time and continue to play a key role in helping sustain and broaden the developmental capacities of clubs as coaches and management committee members. Central to the work of these club ‘organisers’ has been efforts to translate the high levels of interest in football within local BME social and kinship networks into valuable and realised football participation opportunities. Accordingly, all BME clubs had in recent years exercised a marked shift in their developmental focus to provide extensive and structured youth football provision and with some significant success to this end: almost 600 young people between the ages of eight and eighteen were presently involved in teams organised by these five clubs. The interviewee below provides an overview of the shifting priorities of BME clubs over time and references the importance of generational and cultural factors in enabling the development of a vibrant infrastructure for youth football provision:

‘When I was young, in the 70s, the only ethnic minority teams that were around were adult teams. You sort of looked at them as though one day you would be joining them. Once those teams had got organised and the players had played out their own careers it wasn’t until the 1990s that there was a big push for the younger teams, on a consistent basis. The concentration now is to encourage young children to take up football, so all the ethnic minority clubs in Leicester have got lots of teams for the
Whist one BME club had ceased to run male adult teams and now focused solely on youth football provision, other BME clubs had enabled clear pathways from the youth game into the adult game through the establishment of ‘transition’ teams for older youth players. Here, there was a general sense that the positive sporting (and social) investment in younger footballers and the provision of opportunities for structured progression into the adult game would help contribute to the longer-term sustainability of clubs. These intentions were borne out by survey findings which indicated that almost one-half (49%) of all present adult players at these clubs had formerly participated as players within club youth sections.

The shift towards focused youth football provision has been significantly aided by the historical rooted-ness of BME clubs and the increasing generational embedded-ness of the culturally diverse communities resident in Leicester. This has better enabled BME clubs to build on longstanding familial connections and encouraged parents to assume coaching and team management responsibilities parallel with their child’s involvement in specific teams across an annual shift in age range. The role of ‘parent-coach’ is relatively common-place across youth football networks more broadly and has recently been better enabled at BME clubs by encouraging and supporting parents to undertake Level One and further coaching qualifications in return for their volunteer support. Survey findings indicated some initial success on this score: BME clubs featured forty-five qualified coaches of which almost one-half (47%) had also achieved Level Two and Level Three coaching qualifications.

The recent efforts of the LRCFA Coaches Association to transfer the delivery of coach education courses from traditional (geographically and culturally inaccessible) venues in the broader region to more community-based venues in neighbourhoods with significant BME populations was felt to have assisted BME clubs in this process. The interviewees below reflect on the experiences and empowerment of (newly qualified) coaches and the impact on sustaining the cultural appeal of BME clubs to youth cohorts:

‘All of our coaches have done the Level One together at a local college, so they didn’t feel isolated or alienated, you know, with a strange group of

kids. There’s a lot more support for it and its much better organised now than it used to be for us when we were kids.’ (Vice-Chair, Majority BME club)
people. They thoroughly enjoyed it. Now they can brag that they’ve got this coaching badge and put it to good use by coaching in the community’

(Vice-Chair, Majority BME club)

‘If you see the people at a club and they are all White it can sometimes put the young kids off. [Our club] have Black and Asian coaches and managers. Black and Asian players think this is OK this is for me’

(Committee Member, Majority BME club)

Nonetheless, the significant financial costs incurred by coach education courses was felt by a number of interviewees to have disproportionately disadvantaged potential coaches at BME clubs from engaging in these training programmes and concomitantly to have slowed the intended pace of club development. The inflated cost of coach education courses is, of course, a significant barrier to potential coaches from all communities but is arguably most pronounced at clubs situated in areas of high social and economic deprivation which are also forced to seek out additional funds to help keep player membership rates artificially low in order to engage young people from low income families in organised football. Interviewees below articulate further some of the financial difficulties faced by BME clubs and the impact on enabling increased engagement with coach development courses:

‘Most of the people that we cater for are predominantly from the inner-city and the poor estates. They haven’t got any disposable income, so the club has to subsidise all of that. It means we have to work harder to get it from other places’ (Vice-Chair, Majority BME club)

‘The number one barrier is price. That may be symptomatic of every-one else as well, but it’s certainly the case for the black players at our club’

(Committee Member, Majority BME club)

The efforts of BME clubs to increase coaching capacities were a part of a broader approach to designed to sustain and enhance club development infrastructures and to provide a more ‘professional’ service to their target client group of culturally diverse youthful communities. To this end all BME clubs in Leicester had strongly engaged with and had achieved nationally accredited FA Charter Standard Club status and were all actively working towards more advanced ‘Development’ and/or ‘Community’ status awards. This process was felt to have benefited BME clubs in
terms of providing an appropriate and comprehensive framework within which to implement improved mechanisms of support for club ‘workers’ and to have raised the profile and ‘respectability’ of clubs with local schools and youth agencies. Whilst work of this kind had engendered some initial administrative capacity issues there was a strong sense that BME clubs had been able to draw positively on the accrued and varied professional skills of management committee members which strongly reflected the diversity of occupational identities in the city of Leicester. This was especially the case with respect to the (mainly East African Asian) BME club ‘workforce’ drawn from the local business and legal sector, but, also, with regard to the strong representation of BME club ‘workers’ drawn from a range of public sector occupations focusing on youth education and community work.

‘In terms of management we’ve got a proper accountant, we’ve got a businessman as a fundraiser. We’ve people involved in our club from social work backgrounds, mental health backgrounds, legal background and people who are just there to be that extra person but every little bit counts’ (Vice-Chair, Majority BME club)

The extent to which the efforts of BME club ‘organisers’ have been reciprocated or hindered by the approach and activities of the local governing body is discussed in the section below.

The relationship between BME clubs and the LRCFA

Whilst the work of BME clubs in Leicester to improve club development infrastructures and to provide a more ‘professional’ service to young client groups had gathered pace in recent years, there was a strong sense that efforts on this score had been undermined by the historically problematic relationship with the local governing body of the sport. In some cases, interviewees alluded to an apparent lack of ongoing support from the LRCFA to help implement and enact the procedures embedded within the FA Charter Standard process and referenced their perceptions of unequal and discriminatory practices which favoured other (white) clubs to this end. However, In other cases, interviewees expressed a more targeted discontentment with administrative practices at the LRCFA with particular reference to perceptions of inequitable disciplinary procedures enacted against players, coaches and managers at BME clubs and which was felt to have threatened to overshadow some more positive examples of collaborative working with the
governing body’s club development and coach education sectors. Findings here allude more broadly to emergent structural fissures within the organisational make-up, roles and responsibilities of CFA’s in England. The work of Lusted is particularly instructive in identifying the traditional modus operandi of local administrative football governance structures and the distinctly conservative and colonialist ideologies of largely older, white males who occupy powerful positions within this voluntary and relatively autonomous infrastructure. The culturally defensive and distinctly protectionist hegemonic practices of CFA’s contrast sharply with the more egalitarian and reformist philosophies of national FA funded and newly appointed (often, much more youthful) football development officers with a professional remit to increase participation and address ongoing inequalities in the game at the local level. The interviewee below comments on the apparent uneven-ness of dealings with the local governing body on this score and the impact on efforts to build capacity at BME clubs:

‘Every time one of my Managers receives a fine for a disciplinary offence that hasn’t been investigated properly, you then have to balance that against the County FA Coaches Association using [our club] for the first time for a Level Two coaching course so that people locally can tap into it. So you get a positive, like the Coaches Association, and a negative, in terms of the way in which the administrative and disciplinary process operates’ (Committee Member, Majority BME club)

The apparent lack of effective action and transparency in dealing with incidents of racism in the local game has also become a constant source of tension between BME clubs, match officials and the local governing body. These concerns were forcefully outlined by BME clubs in Leicester in submissions to the Football Task Force (1998) and have been consistently articulated since this time through a local multi-agency football-based anti-racism forum. Whilst this forum has afforded BME clubs a conduit through which to engage directly with the LRCFA it has arguably engendered little shift in terms of circumventing the often lengthy and unwieldy disciplinary processes and procedures of local football governance. This has led to an increased frustration amongst BME clubs (and other agencies) and has brought into sharp focus the apparent unwillingness of the LRCFA to recognise and adapt presently inadequate structures for the effective and equitable governance of local football:
‘The disciplinary system is still shocking and appalling. It currently stands that if you are a White player at a predominantly White club and you fall foul of the disciplinary process in any way then you are far more likely to get a result that benefits you, than you were if you were a Black and Asian club and you need to utilise the County FA administration process. A lot of it is to do with the people who administer and manage the game, they are not equitable in their representation and in their processes and practices’ (Committee member, BME club)

The comments above also allude to the hegemonic whiteness of local administrative football governance structures which has occluded any sense of inward gaze and has allowed key power-brokers within the LRCFA to deny the widespread existence and veracity of racism in the local game and to ‘problematis’ the ongoing vocal critique by BME clubs as ‘rabble rousing’, ‘trouble-making’ and as ‘playing the race card’. The demographic dominance of older white males in senior positions at the LRCFA and the reluctance to ‘open-up’ a series of relatively closed practices of recruitment to local football governance organising committees has further contributed to the general sense of racially inflected institutional closure apparent within the local governing body. This insular and archaic approach sits uneasily with the broader leftist political model of ‘multi-cultural’ Leicester within which many of the BME club ‘workforce’ have been actively involved in creating and promoting across a range of sporting and societal settings and has hindered a more general sense of cultural belonging in the sport amongst BME communities. These longstanding cultural inequities are apparent both in the structural governance of the game and in the more general interactions between BME clubs and the local governing body. This section closes with the highly illuminating testimony of one interviewee’s heightened sense of exclusion from local (white) football networks engendered at an official LRFCA Annual General Meeting (AGM):

‘Quite often when we go to AGMs, the way they [the LRCFA] are with English [white] club committee members. We’re just standing there in one corner, there isn’t any interaction, they don’t talk to us. When you see all of that you think, people like us think, you don’t want to be a part of this. It’s the whole approach, when you walk into their arena, we don’t get ‘How are you? How’s things?’ Nothing like that. Not just me, the black people, other Asians, nothing. It’s just amazing when they see the other
White committee members at clubs, then it’s like, you know, years and years of friendship.' (Committee Member, Majority BME club)

Concluding comments

This chapter has argued that the socio-historical development of BME clubs in Leicester cannot be divorced from both the national political context surrounding ‘new commonwealth’ in-migration to Britain and the prevailing social climate of racial politics within which societal and sporting relations have been ‘played out’ at the local level. In this respect, the sudden volume and relative unique-ness of in-migration trajectories to Leicester from the 1960s onwards engendered significant and openly (and politically) expressed racial hostilities from indigenous white communities concerned by the rapidly changing nature of local racial demography’s. These racisms and embedded oppositions to racial integration were especially evident within the culture and practice of pre-existing and homogenously white football club networks and arguably acted as an accelerant to the formation of clubs from within BME kinship, community and religious networks. These BME clubs have since provided a conscious physical safeguard against the ongoing realities of overt racist expression and more subtle, nuanced and codified forms of cultural racisms designed to mark out some contingent boundaries of cultural belonging and inclusion in the local game. In doing so, BME clubs have become a highly visible cultural resource and have operated as a physical and symbolic space in which positive sporting and societal representations of BME communities have become realised and celebrated. The identifiable (and identifiably) attachments of these local sporting institutions continue to engender a strong cultural appeal to both younger and older BME participants as sites in which to enable opportunities for familial, cultural and religious continuities and the production of new, youthful, multi-ethnic sporting identities.

This shifting focus of BME clubs towards becoming facilitators of extensive and structured youth football provision was a markedly recent phenomenon and responded directly to strong levels of interest in the sport amongst the numerically increasing cohort of BME youth communities in the city of Leicester. Whilst the positive sporting investment in young footballers and the development of clear pathways of progression from the youth to the adult game had helped to sustain the longevity of clubs of this kind, there was, too, a strong sense that BME clubs had consciously engendered a range of wider beneficial social outcomes through
encouraging increased social capital, youth citizenship and civic participation through the medium of voluntary sport engagement. This was arguably especially the case at clubs which had been successful in engaging young people drawn from ‘displaced’ asylum and refugee communities whose marginalisation from local societal relations was also informed by their experiences of acute social and economic deprivation. BME clubs also provided sites in which racial integration (rather than cultural separatism) was positively encouraged through the provision of valuable participation opportunities in organised football competition with other clubs and through the targeted focus of young people from some racially mixed and culturally diverse social networks and residential locations in urban Leicester. This broader focus on facilitating opportunities for racially integrative youth empowerment was significantly informed by the deeply intentional socialistic philosophies of key figures within senior positions at BME clubs and drew on their significant professional experiences within the local (and highly politicised) public and voluntary sector concerned with the equitable delivery of services and social provision to local multi-cultural communities. The varied professional acumen and transferable skills of BME club ‘organisers’ had also strongly assisted in the implementation of mechanisms designed to enhance BME club and coach development infrastructures to the benefit of participating youth cohorts. These processes were further enabled by the historical rooted-ness and generational embedded-ness of BME clubs (and BME communities) in Leicester and the tendency to encourage and utilise longstanding familial connections within ‘parent-coach’ capacities.

However, the findings in this chapter also suggest that the infrastructural progress of BME clubs had been undermined by their historically problematic relationship with the local governing body of the sport, with specific reference to perceptions of unequal and discriminatory disciplinary procedures, the apparent reluctance to acknowledge and then deal swiftly, effectively and transparently with incidents of racism, and the ‘problematisation’ of BME clubs as complaining and confrontational. These culturally defensive philosophies and practices allude to the deeply embedded hegemonic whiteness and racialised power-base within local football governance within which the authority of senior officials to act as gate-keepers to the process of enabling or denying best racial equality practice seems especially strong. The sustainability of a series of racially closed operational practices within local football governance is particularly evident in the apparent inequities of access to local organising and decision-making committees and the limited accountability of such bodies to the national ownership of the game, but is also apparent in their reluctance
to engage more equitably and effectively with BME clubs on a range of issues affecting their involvement in the sport. It is against this backdrop of racially inflected institutional closure and the deeply protectionist rather than reformist practices of the LRCFA that the socio-historical development and shifting focus of BME clubs in Leicester might be better contextualised. To this end, it might be argued that much of the developmental progression of BME clubs over time has been achieved in spite of – rather than because of – the input of the LRCFA. Further the continued capacity of BME clubs to facilitate safe and supportive multi-ethnic leisure spaces which enable valuable physical participation opportunities and wider outcomes of racial integration, social cohesion and community empowerment, owes much to the skills, commitment and resilience of longstanding (and newer) club ‘organisers’. Long may their efforts continue and with wider recognition and more equitable reward.

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Bibliography


