

# The Fans Strike Back: Football Fanzines In Britain, 1972-92

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The Oxford English Dictionary traces the usage of the word 'fanzine' back to 1949 and the United States: 'A magazine for fans.' After it was re-invented in Britain in 1972 the definition should have changed to: 'For, and by, fans.' Originally coined by the Punk Rock generation, who issued a number of non-conformist publications, the football (i.e., soccer) subculture quickly latched on to the fanzine movement.

Disillusioned with the growing cynicism that was affecting the game, both on and off the field, a group of Cambridge University students put together *Foul* - the first alternative football paper. For four years *Foul* punctured pomposity, deflated egos and mercilessly lampooned its targets, always with humour, sometimes with venom.

In March 1986, ten years after the demise of *Foul* due to legal action, a new magazine, *When Saturday Comes* appeared. Originally meant as an insert to a Punk fanzine, *WS Chas* became Britain's most widely read alternative football publication. It was soon joined by *Off The Ball* and the Scottish based *The Absolute Game*.

By the end of the 1986-87 season there were still only a handful of football fanzines in existence. Of those based around the clubs, most were ostensibly supporters club magazines, albeit taking the first tentative steps away from the safe sterile type of offering normally associated with such sources into an altogether harder hitting, more critical and, most importantly, a more humorous vein.

Then came the British government's attempt to clamp down on football supporters and their ilk. An intensely dislikeable Minister of Sport, and a Prime Minister with non-sporting appreciation, saw the lower socio-economic football followers demand a voice in the direction their sport was taking. Their opinions could be channelled through fanzines. The fans could now strike back

Suddenly the number of titles began to grow at an astonishing rate. Circulations of 200 to 500 for first-class clubs became 5,000 to 10,000: On average one in three spectators would buy a fanzine. As criticism grew so clubs tried to ban sales. Legal actions were defended by fans contributing to funds.

This paper highlights the general growth in fanzines from three in 1986 to over one thousand in 1992. Research by the Department of Sociology at Leicester University shows that over *three million* fanzines will be bought this 1992-93 season.

The fanzine industry is now a very powerful voice of the game. But beware: the clubs are waiting to strike back.