

Anton Rippon, *Soccer: The Road to Crisis*. Moorland Publishing, Ashbourne, Derbyshire, 1983. pp.200. £7.95.

This is an intensely frustrating book about English soccer. Written by a freelance writer with a reputation as an after-dinner speaker, and a soccer lover over thirty years, it is in many ways a reflection of the ills of the game it aims to portray. The nature of the crisis is never explicitly defined, though the main element seems to be taken as the decline in attendances since the post-World War Two peak. Failure on the part of directors to grasp Micawberrian economics, the influence of television, hooliganism (this written, of course, before Heysel) and a decline in the quality of entertainment offered by the game, plus the counter-attractions of a modern consumer society, are variously canvassed as explanations for the crisis.

Yet the author is well aware that at amateur and non-League

levels English soccer is thriving and is still the major spectator sport, and he quotes extensively from modern players and managers about the modern skills and demands of the game. One is tempted to believe that the title of this book is like a newspaper headline, dreamed up by the sub-editor to make sure that the reader will stop and take notice, but bearing only a tangential relationship to the contents of what follows.

Indeed, if one takes this book as a series of largely disconnected but often interesting, and sometimes perceptive, reflections on the game by the author and by the various people he has interviewed, one gets far more from it than if one treats it as an analysis of, or remedy for, a crisis. Even so, one suspects that the best use has not been made of much useful material. For example, we are told tantalisingly that the author spent an evening with Willie Young on the day he was given a free transfer by Brian Clough at Nottingham Forest and that the big centre-half 'talked of the game's problems in a way that would have surprised his critics.' But apart from a two-line comment on the differences between Clough and Peter Taylor's management styles, we get no indication of Young's opinions. Julie Welch of *The Observer* was able to characterise the unique contributions and perspectives of Young, Jim Holton and Roger Hynd in one article, yet Rippon, for all his eye for the right people to interview, seems curiously unable to sharpen our focus on the game and its problems. Nevertheless, the best pieces in the book are to be found in the extracts from discussions with directors like Gilbert Blades and Martin Spencer, managers like Richie Barker and Graham Turner and players including Phil Brown and Brendan Batson - not household names and all the more worthwhile for that.

A final note of frustration concerns the repetition of many half-truths and myths about the game. A proven connection between local industrial productivity and the success of the area's soccer team is twice asserted, but I know of no carefully documented evidence to substantiate this. Nor did Hungary win the World Cup, even if Billy Wright is quoted as the source.

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