

4

Playing the Game

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I enjoyed talking with my father and brother. Among our favourite topics was sport, especially football.

At that time, Newcastle, my home town, was often top of the English Premier League. Today, alas, we are somewhere mid-way up that League. The top teams are usually those rich enough to buy star players, and Newcastle is not a very big or rich city.

The rules of sportsmanship seem to have changed since those days more than half a century ago, when our football team was made up of Newcastle players, “Geordies”, as we like to call ourselves. That does not mean that we would not accept players of other races or colours. It does mean that we did not depend on how much money we had to buy star players from other countries, as is the custom today.

In fact, football has become commercialized, because athletes can earn huge salaries, and can be sold to any team that can afford the price of a star player. Consequently they may not be playing for their own cities, but may have been bought from any other city or country. Football stars may therefore not be willing to play for their own home team, and may put money and popularity before loyalty.

Yes, money can spoil the enjoyment in any sport, and can

ruin the idea of sportsmanship. You have probably seen how fans sometimes riot if their favourite team loses a match. Many gamble on matches and don't appreciate skilful play, because they are worrying about whether they will win their bet. Sometimes after a match the fans, or even in some cases the players themselves, begin to fight. Some fans even go into the city and throw beer-bottles at shop-windows or overturn cars. That kind of conduct is not sport, but vandalism.

At school we were taught, when we played any match with another school team, to accept defeat or victory, and to shake hands politely, no matter how disappointed we felt. We played, not for a prize, but just for the honour of representing our school. If we were given our “school colours” (a strip of ribbon to sew on to our uniforms) we felt very happy to have served our school.

Let us relearn the art of true sportsmanship, and enjoy watching the skills of the players, rather than considering only our own selfish interests.