

## Football shirt assembly

It's September, and for many of us that means an exciting thing – the start of the football season. Football is an industry as well as a passion. In 2022, the Premier League generated revenue of nearly £6.5bn. Some of that income is from the sale of football shirts. If you want the top of the range man's Liverpool shirt, it will cost you £125. Liverpool have a five-year contract with Nike worth £150 million plus a 20% commission from sales.

Adidas agreed a 10-year deal with Manchester United, which sees them pay a whopping £750 million to the club over the course of the decade. Man U expect £80 for a man's shirt. A Crystal Palace mens' shirt would cost you £60. But then, Crystal Palace should be paying me for wearing their shirt.

Football shirts have evolved over time to become the iconic colours that now define our football clubs. Liverpool ran out onto the pitch in the 1890s wearing light blue and white strips. Manchester United were once wearing green and gold.

In modern times the football kit has become, among football fans, a display of uniformity and colour, forming a core part of a club's identity and history – clothing to wear into battle. Psychological studies show that teams wearing red are more likely to win than if they are wearing other colours...

However, each team's uniqueness came about by accident. For example, in 1890 Wolverhampton Wanderers played Sunderland. That day at Roker Park both sides ran out in red and white, causing confusion amongst the spectators. The next season the English Football Association ruled that no two clubs could register the same-coloured kits; Wolverhampton Wanderers chose 'Old Gold and Black' shirts, based on the town's motto 'Out of Darkness Cometh Light'.

Every football club has a story about how their unique strip came about. But when football began to spread beyond Britain to other clubs in Europe and around the world, the stories of how they got their kit are fascinating.

One of the main ways overseas clubs chose their kit was in honour of British clubs they found to be an inspiring role model. Real Madrid is one of the most famous clubs in the world - any football fan will tell you they play in an all-white kit that has been worn by some of the greatest players in history. When the club was founded in 1902, however, the world's most famous club was Corinthian FC of London, an amateur team who refused to play competitive matches and would only play friendlies. Despite their amateur status, Corinthian FC provided most of the English national team's players in the late 19th century and they had a worldwide reputation for their exciting style of play and their sporting conduct. The term 'Corinthian Spirit' is still used to describe the highest standard of sportsmanship. Famously, this approach was summed up in their attitude to penalties. As far as they were concerned, a gentleman would never commit a deliberate foul on an opponent, so if a penalty was awarded against the Corinthians, their goalkeeper would stand aside, lean on the goalpost, and let his opponent tap the ball into an empty net. Conversely, if the Corinthians themselves won a penalty, the captain would take a short run-up and kick the ball over the crossbar. Despite - or perhaps because of - this approach, they had an outstanding record, beating teams from around the world, including an 11-3 victory over Manchester United in 1904 - still the greatest loss in Manchester United's history. Corinthian FC wore white shirts and the

founders of Real Madrid chose the same colour for their club, from admiration of their values, fame and success.

Juventus are one of Italy's most famous teams. When they opened their incredible new stadium in 2011, they made a strange choice for the first game against invited opponents: Notts County, the oldest team in English football but now languishing in the lower leagues.

Since their founding in 1897, Juventus had worn a pink kit. However, in 1903 they needed to distinguish themselves from Palermo, who also wore pink. To help them decide on a new look, they turned to an English Juventus player, John Savage, who had helped found the club. With connections back in Nottingham, Savage contacted a colleague at Notts County Football Club to ask if Juventus could use the black and white stripes of Notts County. Since then, stars such as Platini, Zidane, Del-Piero and Ronaldo have enjoyed success in Turin wearing the colours of the Magpies of Meadow Lane, who are currently in League 2, the fourth tier of English football.

Another way that European clubs acquired their football kit was from the actions of a single influential man. Atletico Bilbao are one of only three clubs never to be relegated from Spain's La Liga. Since 1912, the club has had an unwritten rule whereby the club will only sign players who were born in the Basque Country or who learned their football skills at a Basque club. The town of Huelva is famous for the giant open cast mines of Rio Tinto, which create a surreal, almost lunar landscape. In 1902, Spanish football was born there, founded by Lancashire miners. In their first season, the Basque side wore a blue and white kit to honour Blackburn Rovers of Lancashire. However, by 1909 the kit was getting tatty. Juan Elorduy, a Basque student and player, was visiting the UK and contacted the original shirt providers, but found the Rovers shirts were sold out. On his way back to Spain via the port of Southampton, he decided to try his luck purchasing red and white shirts of the local team. Thus, the red and whites of Bilbao were born.

Club Atlético Newell's Old Boys is based in Rosario, Santa Fe. The Argentinian club was founded in 1903. Newell's Old Boys have won six Argentine Primera División championships plus three National cups. They nurtured a young Lionel Messi and gave Diego Maradona his own personal throne when manager. The club is named after Isaac Newell. As a 16 year-old, he made the journey to Rosario in 1869, 200 miles northwest of Buenos Aires, to work as a teacher.

Newell loved football - he brought the rules of the game and the first footballs to Argentina, promoting a game which would become a religion for the locals. In 1884, Newell opened the Argentine Commercial Anglican School; from the school grew a football club, called Newell's Old Boys. For its kit they took the colours of the school – red and black.

Many clubs used their kit to show appreciation of memories and old connections. Originally, Derry City in Ireland chose the colours of claret and blue as the club strip, the same colours as Aston Villa of Birmingham. However, this was all to change in the 1930s with the arrival of Billy Gillespie as manager. Gillespie had made his name as captain of Sheffield United, winning the FA Cup in season 1924/25. He had also scored twice for Ireland against England in 1914, Ireland's first ever victory over England on English soil. Derry City were so in awe of the legendary Gillespie they changed their kit to the red and black of Sheffield United, the 'Blades of Yorkshire'.

One last story for you – and I have kept the best till last. Barcelona are one of the most iconic football clubs in the world, in a beautiful city named after Hannibal Barca, famous for invading Rome by taking elephants over the Alps. Barcelona's kit is arguably even more famous than Real Madrid's, with its blue and red stripes being central to the club's identity. The colours are reflected in their club nickname Blaugrana: 'blau' the Catalan word for blue, and 'grana' the word for a deep red. The club was founded in 1899 and two sport-loving brothers - Arthur and Ernest Witty, sons of a British businessman who had settled in Barcelona - became heavily involved. They brought the first footballs, whistles, and nets to help establish the game in the city. In addition, they also imported a set of blue and red rugby shirts from the school in the UK where they had been pupils. The newly formed Barcelona FC ran out to play in those shirts and have used the colours ever since. What was the name of that school, which gave the blue and red colours to Barcelona? It was Merchant Taylors' School. Not us, but the associated school in Liverpool called Merchant Taylors' School, Crosby. Who would have thought that we, though our Livery Company, would be linked to the story of one of the greatest football clubs on the planet? Merchant Taylors' and Barcelona – I'll take that, even at one remove.

You may have been wondering why I have shared these stories of the way overseas clubs got their kit, and there you have it – I wanted to tell you about that link between Merchant Taylors' and Barcelona. But in telling the stories, I also find other reasons. We talk a lot nowadays about living in a globalised world that is so much more connected and interdependent than that of our ancestors, but it's fascinating to learn how it has long been the case that simple - and sometimes quite random - connections between people in different countries can lead to customs and traditions so well established that people around the world will recognise them. I wonder what the founders of Corinthians or the Witty brothers would think if they knew how much money the football shirts of Real Madrid and Barcelona had made over the years, or what they had come to symbolise for supporters of each club.

There is a saying: 'Yesterday's river grinds no corn'. It means that the past is dead and gone. That saying is wrong. Yesterdays are so important to our todays. We are the sum total of a billion different connections from the past, and that is as true of football clubs as it is of us.