



RAMBLINGS OF A PRIVATEER
Volume Two

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By Adam Favel

*Three pieces on what sport forgets, and what it's
actually for.*

- A.F.

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NO MORE IDOLS

I was walking my dog this morning, and while she walked and smelled stuff and did all the things a dog does with space and freedom, I was building a playlist on a music app I have on my phone (no, not the one that rhymes with "Schmotify").

I had an old iPod Classic from many years ago. I loved that thing, loaded it to the gills with every piece of music I'd collected over the years. When its headphone jack broke and I was unable to use it, I had to move over to the usual streaming apps to find all of it again. But a while back I found the source files on an old external hard drive, and I uploaded a bunch of them into my phone, and found a music player app, so that I could play those without all of the other bells and whistles. That music reminds me of a simpler time, a time where things made more sense, and a time where optimism reigned supreme.

I was building a playlist of songs that remind me of football (soccer). Ones that I remember playing in my headphones as I warmed up to play pickup games, during my time in Germany studying sports for social development, these songs that spurred passion in me, along with the bursts of dopamine that my brain is surely

craving at this moment. And one album came up while searching through. "No More Idols" by Chase & Status.

I don't exactly know why the correlation occurred—okay, I kind of do. Having an ADHD brain that's spent years creating parallels and seeing angles no one else saw, that's what it does. But as soon as I saw those words, I started thinking about the "idol culture" that has come up in sport, particularly in international and professional sports.

The advent of social media created this place where we could follow the every day of people we were never destined to meet, and who we admired from afar. Not just that, we could comment, like, send messages hoping that they would respond, and spend our waking hours scrolling, watching, re-watching everything they do. Under the guise of "brand building" and "making the most of your image," it became this place where we could follow single athletes everywhere they go.

It was great for athletes who didn't have visibility—people could finally follow their journeys and support what they were doing. I'll never fight those benefits as there are so many athletes who deserve their stories to be told and who get lost within all of the noise. But when it came to the "very popular" ones, it created this sort of vacuum effect in my eyes, where the monopolization of attention has created a sort of "idol culture" which besides it taking

away from the original culture of sports, particularly team sports, has created a system where instead of figuring out our own creativity, our own style, and our own perspectives, people are becoming reliant on what these "idols" of theirs do, say, wear, watch, and be. And that is a bit frightening and sad to me.

This idea of "fairweather fans" is pretty recent if you think about it. In the past, when you chose a team to follow, you followed them religiously. You stuck with them through the great seasons and the lousy ones. The highs and the lows. You were happy when the good players were there, and sad when they left for different places. But you constantly stuck around. There was also a geographic support side of it, where your local clubs were places that you focused on first, which built strong community ties, and in turn the local leagues and national leagues were supported and grew because of it.

Then the "idols" came, and that changed. When a player changed clubs, fans changed allegiances. It became fashionable to support clubs because of who played for them, and clubs embraced this from a marketing and commercial standpoint like nobody's business. And when that player left, so did that fairweather fan base, off to the next club where it would be in style and the other one would be forgotten, except by the few.

Don't get me wrong, we still idolized players in the past. It was hard not to admire Michael Jordan flying through the air and hitting fadeaway shots. But as a Detroit Pistons fan, it was more a mix of admiration and "I wish he'd stop doing that against my team." It was hard to dismiss the beauty of Ronaldinho and the skills he showed when he played, along with the joy on his face when he played—but as a Manchester City fan (before the money), I could only watch from afar, wondering what it would be like for him to put on a sky-blue jersey and play for us (which wouldn't even feel that farfetched today).

There was that tie to those teams and clubs and communities that stuck around no matter who was on the field, combined with that admiration of the skills and abilities and strengths of those other players. It was a healthy mix in my eyes, as the local side of it stayed true, but those stars still shone because they could stand out even throughout those loyalties.

Now...I don't even know what to call it.

My work in Africa has been the starkest example of this. Local leagues are forgotten in favor of international leagues due to those star players shining on the television. Instead of supporting the next generation coming through, they don't bother to care, which in turn has created an extractive, exploitative culture of athlete development throughout the continent where the only

way to "make it" is supposedly to go to Europe, which has placed the local scenes as some sort of background act. Where the youth idolize the idols, rather than the ones in front of their faces who could follow that same path if they are given a chance and the right support. And then they try to play the game in the same fashion as their idols, instead of learning to play in a style that fits them.

It's hard to watch. And hard to fix. Because when attention pays dividends to the system, it perpetuates itself. And keeps going.

I know it's worthless to wistfully look at the past and wish for what things were like before. Like my old iPod, replaced by endless music libraries on Spotify and other apps. And in some ways it's a great thing to be able to access and experience all that it can show. But the art of exploring on your own—deciding through trial and error what you like and don't like, building connections that last—that's what's missing now.

Maybe what's missing is learning to idolize ourselves and who we are, instead of idolizing others and wishing we were them. In a world that seems to lack self-confidence on so many levels, where everyone on social media is telling us how much better they are than us, maybe idolizing ourselves first is exactly what we need.

THE GATE SWINGS BOTH WAYS

My first experience with baseball came from a video game — Little League Baseball Championship Series on the NES. Back then we only had a couple of cartridges, so you played what you had, and for whatever reason that game just stuck with me. I played some baseball and softball later, on teams when I was younger, but the sport itself never really took. I think the pace of it didn't agree with my brain — when your head moves as fast as mine does, it's hard to stay locked in while you sit and wait for something to happen. And in the end my playing days were settled by a flyball I lost track of in Grade 5, which caught me square in the forehead and left a perfect imprint of the ball's stitches above my nose until I was in Grade 7. The game, it seemed, had made its feelings clear.

What did stick with me, as I got older and curious about every corner of sport, was the role of data in baseball. Moneyball, really — Billy Beane and the Oakland A's, and the story underneath the movie. And here's the part I loved when I first read about it: Moneyball was a reversal. For a hundred years, scouting ran on instinct — on men who'd spent thirty years watching the game and trusted their gut to tell them who had it. That instinct was real

knowledge. But it was also a gate. If you had the thirty years and the eye, you were in. If you didn't, you were locked out. What Beane's people did was take the numbers — the economics, the formulas, the undervalued stats nobody else was bidding on — and use them to find the players everybody else had missed. It's worth remembering they did this because they were poor: the A's couldn't afford the players the rich clubs wanted, so they went hunting for the value the market had mispriced. Data, in other words, started as the underdog's weapon. And it blew the gate wide open. A whole new way of seeing. I thought it was one of the coolest things I'd ever come across.

It got reinforced by the management sim games I fell in love with — Football Manager, Out of the Park Baseball, Eastside Hockey Manager. All of them run on data: attributes, numbers, the way it all fits together to tell you whether a player, even a fictional one, suits what you're trying to build. Fascinating stuff.

But fast forward to now. In huge swaths of professional and international sport, the data doesn't inform the decision anymore — it *is* the decision. The final word. The calling card for all of it. And somewhere along the way I crossed over and started to empathize with those old scouts I used to think Moneyball had rightly pushed aside. Because here's what all that reliance on data has actually done: it's stripped the human side out of sport.

It's made the whole thing transactional. An athlete stops being a person and becomes a row of numbers.

I'm not going to pretend the old way was pure. Some of those scouts were probably just running on bias — and that bias, the gut that locked out anyone who didn't look the part, was exactly what the numbers were supposed to cure. But the good scouts — the ones who lasted — read two things at once: the skill on the field and the person standing in front of them. What they didn't do was hand the entire decision to a spreadsheet. And that's the part we've lost.

Because here's the cruel joke. Data — the thing that once broke the gate open — has become the new gate. Tighter than the old one. If your numbers don't line up at a particular age, at a particular checkpoint in your development, you don't get a chance. Not because of anything about you, but because the numbers didn't say what somebody wanted to hear. Goodbye. And it's very, very sad.

Here's what I can't get past. Numbers are great. They tell us a lot. But no test fully captures a person — their development, their growth, their personality, the state of their head. We reach for the ones that promise to: the Myers-Briggs four-letter thing and all the rest, and people love to claim those tell you exactly who someone is. But even the people who build them will tell you it's

speculative — not a be-all-end-all. Have someone take one twice, years apart, and watch the answers move, because the person moved. We're not fixed. The number is a snapshot of a moving thing, and we keep treating it like a verdict.

Now take all of that uncertainty and pour it over young athletes from the very beginning, and you've got a real problem. You're playing gatekeeper on the assumption that everyone develops at the same rate — which is completely, flatly false. The late bloomers, the kids who were always going to arrive a year or two after the early growth-spurt crowd, get lost along the way for no good reason. That's the part that genuinely makes me angry.

And I live inside this contradiction every day. When I present an athlete, my portfolios have to carry data too — I have to go and collect it, which in some of the markets I work in is genuinely difficult — because everyone has insisted on it so hard that you can't even show up without it. But I'm always trying to push the human side right alongside the numbers. Trying to get these clubs and federations to understand that the person they're looking at is not a data point. He's a personality. She's a human being with dreams and goals and a whole story. It wears on you, honestly, because of how far the other way the whole thing has tilted.

I'll say something that probably sounds backwards. Some days I'd almost rather a club just told a kid, "I don't like you — something about how you carry yourself, I don't want it in my room." Not because exclusion is ever a nice thing, but because at least that's a human being making a human judgment out loud — one you can see, push back on, maybe even learn from. What we've got instead is "your numbers on this metric aren't high enough, goodbye," and the decision hides behind the data and calls itself objective. A number lets you dodge accountability in a way a person can't. At least the human in front of you can be argued with.

And it isn't only sport. Look at how we live now — everything's a metric. Likes, follows, reach, engagement, every interaction reduced to a count. The same quantitative, transactional logic, everywhere you turn. I find it hard to stomach, because sport at its core is still human emotion. The athletes out there competing are not robots. This isn't Football Manager, where a number defines exactly how a player moves and feels. These are men and women with dreams and fears and brain chemistry and a hundred things that cannot be captured in a column. That stuff is qualitative. It lives in relationships. And the sooner we remember that, the better off we'll be.

I'm not anti-data — I want to be clear about that. What I'm against is choosing it over everything else. We need to

find the balance, the sweet spot between the qualitative and the quantitative, instead of chasing every new dashboard and measurement fad that drops every ten seconds. There was a science to how the good scouts worked, and there is absolutely a place for data inside that science. Both can live in the same room. Right now it doesn't feel like there's any sweet spot at all, and I hope we find it.

Because what Beane and the A's did really was extraordinary. They opened a door. The only problem is what we did with it: we left that door wide open, walked over to the old one, and slammed it shut. Fuck it, we like this one better. Numbers, numbers, numbers — give me something that makes my job easier so I don't have to do the hard part, which is understanding a person. But your numbers can be perfect and that's still a human being you have to actually know. And the sooner we relearn the old skill — building the relationship, reading the person the way those old baseball men could, the way the old football scouts could before they got shoved aside for a model — the better off everyone is. Because people stop getting left behind. And clubs and federations have to put the work back in to understand who they're dealing with, which builds understanding, which builds dialogue, which builds the kind of trust that actually moves the needle on how athletes get treated and protected. Data and human relationship can live together. We just have to

stop pretending we're only allowed to keep one of them. I
really hope we figure it out.

COME WITH ME

One of my first real coaching experiences came right out of university, at the exact moment I had no idea what I was doing with my life.

I'd spent fifteen years training for track and field, chasing the idea of becoming an Olympian, and in my final year of competition — running as an independent on the indoor circuit in my city — I finally understood that the dream wasn't going to happen. So there I was, fresh out of school, holding a degree I wasn't especially interested in using. Environmental studies, environmental law and policy. I'd picked it mostly because it was the one I was closest to finishing, and I wanted out of university as fast as I could get.

My sister was studying medicine then, doing a rotation in psychology, and the professor she was working under ran a soccer program in our city for people who were or had been homeless — people coming through addiction, trauma, the hardest things life can hand you. They were using the game as a way back. As rehabilitation. As reintegration into a society that had mostly stopped seeing them. I'd played soccer for years, so when my sister told me they were putting on an exhibition match between university students and the players from the program, and asked if I'd come be a ringer, I said yes.

I'll be honest about the first time, because the honesty is the whole point of the story. I was nervous. Genuinely nervous. These were men and women from a part of society I'd never once been near. We tend to look at homelessness and feel something close to fear — the people we pass on the street are often carrying things we can't see, withdrawal, untreated illness, a hundred kinds of pain, and it can read as frightening when you don't understand it. That fear was sitting right on me as I walked in. What am I doing here? What do I even do?

So I played. I met a few of the players. I met the coach, the professor running the whole thing. And something clicked that I couldn't have explained at the time.

Because for the first time in my life, I saw that sport was more than competition. Up to that point, competition was the *only* thing sport had ever been to me — fifteen years of trying to be the best, studying the game on my own purely to win at it. And here was a room where being the best was beside the point entirely. Here the game was a tool. For change. For development. For putting people back together. *Sport for social development* — a phrase that didn't mean anything to me yet and would end up meaning everything.

After that first session I asked if I could come back. If they needed help. They did, and I started coaching with them twice a week, riding the train downtown to the fields, working mostly with the keepers, since I'm a

goalkeeper myself and it's the part of the game I love most.

That's how I learned about the Homeless World Cup — a tournament held every year using street soccer, pulling together programs exactly like ours from all over the planet, all of them pointing at the same thing: the game as a lever for change, and a way to force an honest conversation about homelessness. That first year, a couple of our players were selected for Team Canada, and the tournament was in Paris. I wasn't official staff, but I travelled with them, helped warm them up, ended up commentating for the organization's livestreams, and mostly just tried to be there for them through the whole overwhelming thing. It changed me. I was suddenly surrounded by people from every corner of the world doing precisely what I'd just discovered I wanted to do, and it was beautiful.

Eric Cantona was one of the movement's global ambassadors — he'd taken coaching sessions with homeless players himself, years earlier — and for most of my life I'd only half-understood the way he talked about football: all that insistence that the game was something closer to art than commerce, something to be respected rather than endlessly bought and sold. Standing in the middle of all this, I finally understood him. The game can do an enormous amount of good, if we just let it be what it actually is.

The moment I carry, though, came the next year.

It was 2012. I'd just come back from a sports-for-social-development fellowship in Hamburg, and the tournament was in Mexico City, played right in the Zócalo, the vast main square in the centre of the city. The Homeless World Cup runs in tiers, sorted roughly by level, and not every team arrives stacked — plenty of players had never touched a ball before they were brought into a program back home, because the football was never really the point. We'd come through the group stage and into the first round beyond it, and Canada drew Guatemala. The game went to a shootout. And the deciding kick fell to a young man I'd worked with back in our program.

He was one of our players. He'd come through real hardship, had been without a home for a stretch, and he was someone who kept his feelings locked down tight — you could tell, even just training beside him, that life had taught him a long time ago not to hand his trust to people easily. He stepped up with the whole thing on his boot, and he missed. We dropped into the lower bracket. Guatemala went up.

I could see it land on him the instant it happened. A crowd had gathered, and he'd put the weight of all of it on himself, and now he was standing there with something building behind his eyes — that look you learn to

recognize in an athlete who's been handed more than he has the tools to process, right at the edge of going off. I had a place rented a little way from the square. So I went to him and I said, come with me. Come back to my place for a bit.

We rode the subway together, and the whole way he had that face — the one that means a person is still trying to understand what just happened to him, his whole system in shock, somewhere in reset. The couple I was renting from were away for the weekend, so we had the place to ourselves. We got through the door, and he slid down against the wall and just came apart. All of it at once. Almost a howl — pure anguish, everything he'd been holding. I sat down on the floor beside him and let him cry. After a while I put my arm around him and let him know I was there, and once it had worked its way out of him he said it: *I can't believe I let everyone down.*

We talked for the better part of an hour. About how he hadn't let a single person down. About what competition actually is and isn't. And mostly about how far he'd come to be standing in a square in Mexico City at all — how the version of him from a few years back couldn't have imagined this, and how the worst-feeling moments tend, later, to be the exact places people turn and push off from. He went and had a shower. I walked him back to the team hotel. And for the rest of that tournament he was on fire — goal after goal, lit up.

Here's the thing about the Homeless World Cup that I didn't fully appreciate until later: you only get to go once. Ever. One tournament, one time, in your whole life. It sounds almost cruel until you understand the reason — if no one goes twice, the door stays open forever for someone new to walk through and have the same experience you did. So that missed penalty in the Zócalo wasn't a verdict on him. It was just the shape his one chance happened to take. And he took it and made it a beginning. He went home, went back to school, built himself a life. I was prouder than I knew how to say.

I won't pretend every story from those years ended that softly. Some of the people I met were carrying more than any tournament could lift, and football isn't a cure for what the world does to people. But that was never really the measure of it. What stays with me isn't how his life happened to turn out afterward — it's the hour on that floor, which would have mattered just as much either way.

Because that's what the whole thing left me with, and it's underneath everything I've done since. Not the result. The kid against the wall, and the worst moment of his tournament becoming a stepping stone instead of an ending. Sport spends so much of its energy at the top convincing us the number on the scoreboard is the truth of a person. That floor in Mexico City taught me it never is. The humanity was always the point — the connection,

the arm around a shoulder, the one chance handed to someone who'd been counted out. That's the thing the game is actually for. I just wish more of the people running it had spent an hour on that floor.

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