

Top executives no longer paid to play as part of the team

By Stefan Stern

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Here's Ball, running himself daft. And now Hurst - can he do it? He has done, yes! Yes. No! The linesman says no . . . the linesman says no . . . It's a goal! It's a goal! Ooh, and the Germans go mad at the referee . . . this linesman, who can only speak Russian and Turkish . . .

Hello, sports fans. It is now nearly 41 years since the BBC's Kenneth Wolstenholme memorably captured the excitement of that hot Saturday afternoon at Wembley stadium - you know, the day England won the World Cup.

But the specific passage of play described above has been shown again and again in the UK in recent days, following the untimely death of one of England's "summer of '66" footballing heroes, Alan Ball. Eleven minutes into extra time, the 21-year-old Ball, the team's youngest player, raced down the touchline to cross for Geoff Hurst to score.

The British need little excuse to indulge their weakness for nostalgia. And Ball's death has been the cue for some agonising about the state of the game and, indeed, the state of the nation. Unlike today's grotesquely overpaid players, it has been said, Alan Ball was a man of the people. It took him a year to earn what some players now earn in a week.

Does this situation sound at all familiar? Today's superstar executives find, perhaps to their surprise, that they too can command enormous salaries vastly in excess of those their predecessors would have expected to earn.

Like footballers, top business people are bought and sold, are introduced to their new colleagues with great fanfare, and frequently become high-profile figures. Like footballers, executives cite "market forces" as the reason why their pay has climbed so high.

But whereas footballers, even the highest paid ones, usually remember that they are supposed to be on the same side as their team-mates, in business super-charged pay can be hugely divisive. Packages are designed to reward individual contributions. And if you need to tread on somebody else's toes in order to reach your own targets, why on earth wouldn't you?

In their new book, *The Puritan Gift*, Kenneth and William Hopper lament the decline of the great corporations of the postwar years, whose essential collegiality was in part undermined, the authors argue, by the rise of selfish individualism. "Internal markets" were supposed to spur managers on to excel. These markets, the Hoppers write, consist of "allegedly independent agents, competing against one another, as in a souk". But this approach ignores an obvious fact about corporate life. "In any well-run organisation," the authors say, "an individual's achievements [are] likely to be due as much to the wisdom with which he was directed from above, and to the support of his equals and subordinates, as to his own efforts." For good measure, the Hoppers invoke the name of Peter Drucker to back up their views on excessive pay. The great man once wrote: "If the top executive in a company gets a salary several times as large as the salaries paid to the number two, three and four men, you can be sure that the firm is badly managed."

Today's senior managers, according to the popular stereotype, are being paid an absurd multiple of the salaries being received by their more junior colleagues. Top pay has spiralled out of sight and, as a consequence, executives seem distant and detached. This can lead to what Henry Mintzberg calls "management by deeming": far from the field of action, the boss simply declares that something must be so, and lo, it shall come to pass.

Footballers - at least in the UK - are currently viewed in equally stereotypical terms: they are feckless, moronic, splashing cash on fast cars and decadent lifestyles. But this Sunday, the last day of the football season, dozens of Premiership players will be donating a day's pay to a "hardship fund" established by the campaigner Noreena Hertz on behalf of poorly paid nurses (learn more at www.maydayfornurses.com).

Gesture politics, sincere compassion or perhaps a bit of both? You decide. Maybe some guilty consciences have been successfully pricked. Of course, one day's pay is easily given, especially if it is a sum of money you are unlikely to miss. How people behave on the other 364 days of the year matters too.

Last year, talking to the writer Simon Hattenstone, Alan Ball reminisced about what it was like to be a World Cup hero in 1966. "We had this wonderful feeling that we were still part of the people," he said. "Every street in England had a footballer living in it. Not any more. They're behind big barbed-wire fences, they've got security. They are not part of the people. We were ordinary approachable people. You were patted on the back, you were touchable, reachable."

Ball was admired as someone who put more into his profession than he took out of it. He never became a remote, detached figure. If leaders want to enjoy the occasional pat on the back, then they will have to stay within reach.

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