

THE GREAT CLUB RIVALRIES IN ENGLISH FOOTBALL

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Liverpool's Danny Murphy turns away in triumph after curling a free kick over the Manchester United wall and into the net when the two great North-West rivals met at Old Trafford earlier this season.

When Sven Goran Eriksson confirmed that David Beckham, the epitome of Manchester United's global appeal, would be leading England out at the home of Liverpool, he added a new dimension to the rivalry between two of England's biggest clubs.

Indeed, there has been a lot of talk within and around the England camp this week about how Manchester United players would be received by the crowd at Anfield. The debate has an added twist in that the captain of England's opponents, Finland, is Sami Hyypia – one of Liverpool's most popular players.

It is England playing, said an unconcerned Eriksson when asked about possibility of hostility towards Manchester United players by the Liverpool crowd.

Robbie Fowler has pleaded with Liverpool fans not to jeer the United contingent, while Beckham, usually the target of abuse at Anfield, said, 'The real England fans will put club matters aside. Walking out with the England team looking out to the Kop end and seeing all these thousands of England supporters cheering for the team is going to be something special.'

Logic certainly suggests that all the fans should get behind the national team, whenever and wherever it plays, and whoever is in it. But the roots of club loyalties run deep, and inter-club rivalries are part of the life-blood of football.

They are fuelled by a cocktail of influences – family tradition, jealousy, paranoia, humour, blind hatred and of course geography. The natural enemy for Liverpool is Everton – based a few hundred yards away across Stanley Park in the city of Liverpool. And United's obvious rivals are Manchester City.

Derby-day in either city is a major football event, with a distinctive atmosphere and much mutual loathing. Supporters of the losing team have to brace themselves for weeks of ridicule from triumphant fans of the victors – in schools, the work-place and in bars. Yet in recent years, the relative success of each of these four clubs has provided the major source of rivalry, rather than simple geographical proximity.

Consequently, while Everton and Manchester City have struggled to retain a place among the English elite, the seat of the battle has shifted, and now focuses on Liverpool versus Manchester United. Liverpool dominated the silverware in the 1970s and 1980s; Manchester United have assumed that mantle in the 1990s. Fans of one have come to despise and sneer at the successes of the other. Between 1967 and 1993, each Liverpool triumph (and there were many) was a reminder to United that they themselves were under-achieving. Since 1993, every United success reminds Liverpool that the Anfield club's dominance of the League has disappeared, that its proudly-held aura of invincibility has been lost to Old Trafford.

So a clash between these two teams now creates a more hostile, less good-humoured atmosphere than is generated when either meets its city neighbour.

Similarly, the enmity between Manchester United and Leeds United, situated either side of the Pennines, is intense, and not explained purely by geography. There was never much love lost between the two clubs, and the mutual dislike intensified in 1992 when Leeds took advantage of United's nerves to win the League Championship, then promptly sold their most charismatic player – Eric Cantona – to United for a bargain fee. Cantona's arrival was the turning-point in Manchester United's resurgence.

There are other deeply held rivalries in English football. One of the most bitter is that between Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur in North London. In their quest for honours during the last dozen years or so, Arsenal have

usually had to measure themselves against, and overcome, either Liverpool or Manchester United. But their fans have always regarded any victory over Spurs as the sweetest of the season. For their part Tottenham who recently sacked ex-Arsenal legend George Graham as manager are desperate to emerge from the Gunners shadow by winning a major prize. The imminent FA Cup semi-final between the two rivals promises to raise temperatures to a new level.

Newcastle United and Sunderland also enjoy a vigorous mutual loathing that is now firmly reinstated on the calendar with both clubs back in the Premiership. And Aston Villa fans will be able to resume a long-standing rivalry with their neighbours if Birmingham City succeed in their challenge to gain promotion to the Premiership.

Such localised rivalries will put fans prejudices to the test as England's home matches are distributed around the country while Wembley Stadium awaits reconstruction. It may be hard to break the habits of a lifetime, but Eriksson will hope that inter-club enmities really can be set aside at least for 90 minutes while the England team performs.

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