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Paying homage to the Red Devils

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I MET many fanatics last week. I took a two-and-a-half hour train ride from London to Manchester on Wednesday to pay homage to the champion of English football (again), Manchester United.

I thought I was the only Malaysian who did so. I was wrong. Once there, I met several other Malaysians. One of them was a top Malaysian corporate player with his children. They had made the trip because his daughter wanted to buy a T-shirt with the picture of Ryan Giggs, the Red Devils' gifted charmer.

The English football season had already ended but fans continued to go to the stadium to celebrate the championship, buy season tickets or pick up some souvenirs. In fact, a couple of fans were arguing with one of the stadium officers regarding season tickets for the 1997/98 season.

I lost count of the number of locals who were there as well. Just like the Malaysian visitors, they too were buying something or other inside the club's souvenir store which sells all kinds of souvenirs, ranging from jerseys to autographed footballs to mugs and posters.

Lawrence How, a friend and a die-hard supporter of the club, had told me that one needs a lot of money to survive in the store. I exercised considerable restraint and therefore survived the buying spree. It was fortunate that I had bought return tickets for the journey.

I've made several trips to London before but never ventured beyond Oxford Street's Marks and Spencer and the Mawar Restaurant in Edgware Road. This time I was there to cover the so-called holiday of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. As everyone knows, it wasn't a holiday in the actual sense of the word - it was more like a working visit.

Anyway, I've kept the dream of visiting Old Trafford ever since Manchester United won the European Cup in 1968. I've been a fan of the club since my school days, saving limited pocket money to buy weekly football magazines to keep up with news updates at the club.

There's something of an affinity between Malaysians and English football clubs, even though many of them have not had the same kind of success outside their own turf. The only exception, perhaps, is Liverpool who won many honours on the continent but who's now going through some rough times.

Some Liverpool fans in Malaysia, however, are not disturbed by this. They seem to draw comfort from clones who surfaced in recent years. This explains why they were not unhappy when Blackburn Rovers won the championship two seasons ago because the club was managed by a former Liverpool great, Kenny Dalglish.

Some of them argue that they would have felt equally comfortable if Newcastle United had won the championship because it was managed by another prodigal son of Liverpool, Kevin Keegan.

As I said earlier, there's this terrific affinity between Malaysians and English football clubs. Their knowledge of the English game and its history far exceeds that of the semi-pro clubs. I must confess that apart from Zainal Abidin, Azman Adnan and Dollah Salleh, my own knowledge of Malaysian players is embarrassingly limited.

Of course, I remember Mokhtar Dahari, Soh Chin Aun, Santokh Singh and Spiderman Arumugam but that's because they helped create more excitement and success for Malaysia at the international level. Malaysian soccer fans

are starved of international success, which explains why they began rooting for teams outside the country.

Football is beginning to be a big business in Malaysia. The game needs a lot more organisation from the top right down to the fan club. There's a lot more imagination needed apart from good management, better coaching facilities and a business-like approach to administration.

The football clubs in England are run in a very business-like manner, which means no politicians get a peek into their management. This is very different in Malaysia where politicians who know very little about the game, its rules, research and development manage these clubs.

Inevitably, some use the club to further their political career or to use it as a platform to convey their political philosophy and ideologies. As long as politicians and ex-politicians manage football associations, Malaysia can forget about having a club the likes of Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea.

Many of my childhood friends learnt their geography and general knowledge from reading about football, either the European type or the South American type. We used to gather round our school atlas trying to figure where Rio de Janeiro is or where Munich is on the map.

By the same token, some people from other parts of the world would probably know where Kuala Lumpur is through reading about Malaysia's prowess at hockey and badminton. Of course, some know more about Malaysia through the bookies network!

Friendships are also developed through football, through sharing knowledge and giving gifts. I was already in London when Lawrence called my home asking if I wanted to have lunch with Bobby Charlton who was in Kuala Lumpur for a short visit.

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