

TOTTENHAM TILL I DIE

by

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In the summer of 2017, Nashville hosted an International Champions Cup (ICC) match at Nissan Stadium between Manchester City and Tottenham of the English Premier League (EPL). The ICC, a preseason competition, featured selected marquee clubs from Europe's greatest leagues: the Bundesliga, Serie A, La Liga, and the EPL. The match coincided with a nascent interest of mine: association football or, as it is known in the United States, soccer.

Soccer was never a sport that appealed to me at all as a teenager growing up in Western Pennsylvania in the late 1960s. It was baseball—first, last, and always. Certainly, I was aware of the sport and most notably the legendary Brazilian superstar and World Cup winner Pele, who I occasionally read about in newspaper and magazine articles. But I was not then a devotee of “the beautiful game” nor a supporter of any club or country. Fifty years later, it all changed.

The media attention focused on two of the “Big Six” EPL clubs meeting in Nashville fueled my desire to become one of the 3.5 billion fans around the globe who love the game. The match presented me with the opportunity to choose—quite impulsively—a club to follow going forward. And I chose Tottenham Hotspur, located in North London and whose iconic stadium, White Hart Lane, had closed at the end of the 2016-2017 season. Until April 2019, when the state-of-the-art Tottenham Hotspur Stadium opened, the club would call London's Wembley Stadium home.

Closer to me, Nashville was awarded a franchise in December 2017 that would begin competing in the USL Championship in 2018 and then transition to Major League Soccer (MLS) in 2020. With that development, I decided I would also support a professional club now 30 minutes away: Nashville SC.

As a Tottenham fan, I immediately joined the official Nashville Spurs chapter that met each matchday to view the action at a sports bar in the Music City. With my membership came my first scarf, an accessory in team colors (white and navy blue) that adorns supporters whether watching from the stands, in the living room, or at the bar. Given the time difference between Nashville and London (or any away location), kickoffs for matches are scheduled from 6:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., depending on the fixture (the British term for the date of a sporting event and one of many terms I soon learned in the association football lexicon).

As a result of joining the local Spurs chapter, I came to experience a televised sporting event like I never had in my life. The comradery with fellow members, the spontaneous responses to the action, and the songs or chants all combined to welcome and engage me as a participant-observer.

But there was much for me to learn as a neophyte to the game: The playing surface is the pitch; a goalkeeper who is unscored upon in a match keeps a clean sheet; a player who nets two goals earns a brace; the rules are referred to as the laws; a match that ends 0-0 is a nil-nil draw; to dribble is to use the feet to advance the ball; to tackle is to engage the opponent and legally use the foot to dispossess the ball; to concede is to give up a goal. My understanding and vocabulary of the game grew week after week.

To fit in with members on matchday, I purchased my first official Spurs jersey in navy blue (away colors). This part of the kit of a footballer is adorned with the badge of the club on the front. For Spurs, the badge is the cockerel in profile standing on top of the ball. Since then, I have acquired two more jerseys: one in white (home colors) and one in yellow (a third or alternative kit).

I began to read the writers and columnists who covered the game for the major sports media outlets, including ESPN; joined Spurs booster groups on social media, particularly Facebook; and followed Alasdair Gold, the correspondent who currently covers the club for Football.London. In a post on social media, I asked for recommendations on the best history of Tottenham Hotspur, a club founded in 1882, and purchased *The Biography of Tottenham Hotspur: The Incredible Story of the World Famous Spurs* by Julie Welch. In addition, my late cousin, Richard Morgan, an avid Liverpool FC backer, recommended *Around the Grounds: The Essential Fans' Guide to the Clubs of the English Football League* by Chris Nelson. This volume was published as a directory to the 92 clubs in the top four divisions of English football as of 2010. Filled with descriptions of the grounds, highlights of each club, and recommendations for home and away fans, the book assisted me immensely in becoming acquainted with the rich history of the English game at the club level.

When I was not with the Nashville Spurs on matchday, I enjoyed watching the action at home. To increase my familiarity with the basic elements of the game—formations, set piece strategies, and tactical fouls, to name a few—I usually selected another EPL match over the weekend to view as a neutral. As a result, I gained more confidence in understanding the in-game decisions by managers, the roles of the

position players (forwards, midfielders, defenders), and the sport's terminology such as "crowding the six-yard box"; "playing out from the back"; and "running into space" that are repeated often by commentators and pundits. It also introduced me to many of Tottenham's opponents in the league.

In addition to the EPL schedule of fixtures, I discovered during my first season that Tottenham was to appear in two annual domestic cup competitions and had qualified for the Champions League based on the team's finishing position in 2016-2017. The domestic matches introduced me to the Football Association (FA) of England and its pyramid structure of professional and nonleague clubs. It fascinated me, for example, that a fourth-tier club could advance to the quarterfinals of a domestic cup against a Premier League club with vastly larger resources and quality players. The Champions League enlarged my perspective of football through a competition that included 32 teams from the top-flight leagues across Europe. I quickly became acquainted with the legacy of clubs such as Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, and Juventus as I often watched other matches as a neutral. In 2019, Tottenham would reach the Champions League final, only to lose to Liverpool, 2-0. I was gutted by the outcome.

Soon after Nashville SC transitioned to MLS in 2020, I began to watch games at home and then was fortunate to attend a match at Nissan Stadium—my first experience as a spectator among tens of thousands of fans. Additionally, I have gone to two matches of the United States Men's National Team hosted in Nashville. I have become a proud follower of my country's teams, both men's and women's, especially during the Olympic and World Cup competitions.

Six years later, I am a seasoned spectator of soccer, or as I prefer, association football. I put myself out of my comfort zone to learn how to view and converse intelligently about a sport that entertains and inspires half the planet. Ironically, I was not present for the Manchester City vs. Tottenham match in Nashville. Perhaps someday I will be in the stands in England or in the States watching the action on the pitch. Until then, and until the end, I will raise my voice along with all the other Spurs supporters and chant:

Tottenham till I die,
I'm Tottenham till I die,
I know I am,
I'm sure I am,
I'm Tottenham till I die.