

# Why is TV dialogue about football so rubbish? With Adam Hurrey of Football Cliches

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A typical match day scene is playing out on screen in the BBC drama *Mix Tape*. It's meant to mimic what happens at hundreds of stadiums up and down the country every weekend.

Floodlights in the distance. Check. Throngs of matchgoers marching towards the stadium in ant-like unison. Check. Air bristling with the hubbub of pre-match chat. Check. But then, slowly, and disastrously, the camera pans down and homes in on one conversation.

“Yeah, we’ve been shit since...”

“I know, I know.”

“You’ve gotta support the team though, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Hang on. Something’s not quite right here. It’s hard to figure out what’s more suspect: the dodgy version of Bramall Lane in the distance, or the dodgy dialogue ([30 minutes in, if you want to hear it for yourself](#)). Just think about it. Have you ever said the phrase: ‘You’ve gotta support the team though, haven’t you?’ to anyone, ever?

Welcome to the weird world of TV football dialogue. A world full of odd phrases, awkward conversations, and words that you would never hear a football fan utter. Whenever football chat pops up in a film or TV script, the characters talk about it in a relentlessly strange way. And it feels like no corner of the cultural landscape is safe from this pandemic.

The examples are plentiful. As a Sunday League game plays out in one episode of *Happy Valley*, the goalkeeper is [heard](#) screaming an endless stream of football-illiterate nonsense: ‘Tackle him, you twat!’, ‘Anticipate, anticipate, anticipate!’ and arguably the best one: ‘That were a golden opportunity!’ In *Line of Duty*, one character casually [mentions](#) that her TV package includes all of the ‘cheap as chips’ Champions League games. Surely anyone with even a passing interest in football would know that Champions League games are anything but cheap as chips?

Fascinatingly, shit TV football dialogue appears to transcend borders. In the Norwegian Netflix drama *Pernille*, a group of friends are gathered around the telly watching a Liverpool game. One of them [yells](#), pundit-like, ‘That was such an important goal!’ after seeing Liverpool equalise. In the English-dubbed version,

it gets worse. 'They're so lucky they scored that!' one character shouts, mystifyingly, about her own team.

Adam Hurrey has been cataloguing these weird snippets of football-related dialogue in the *Football Cliches* podcast for several years. "Every time a football scene comes on in a show like this, I will either be sent it for the podcast or I'll see it for myself and I'll just know it won't be very good," he says. "It's a bit like hearing someone try to speak English and they're getting a word slightly wrong. Your brain automatically goes: 'OK, that's not quite right.' It's just not how football fans speak."

Hurrey says there is an 'irregular, weird tone' about the way characters chat about football on TV. Sometimes they sound like pundits, like in the *Happy Valley* example above ('That were a golden opportunity!'). At other times, the dialogue feels like what ChatGPT would spit out if you asked it to generate some generic football fan chat ('Gotta support the team though, haven't you?' or '[Good skills, son!](#)'). The dialogue is often oddly vague, with characters talking about 'the team' or 'the big game' instead of specific clubs or players. And when they do get specific, it's often way too much. In a recent episode of *EastEnders*, the characters started [barking](#) the names of nine (nine!) Lionesses back to each other without a pause.

At this point, I know what you're probably thinking. Why does any of this matter? Who cares if dialogue about football sometimes seems a little off? Well, screenwriters are capable of going to extreme lengths to make sure scripts sound natural—so why should football dialogue be any different? When Paul Schrader was writing *Taxi Driver*, he spent weeks driving around NYC in the early hours to get a sense of how late-night revellers spoke and acted. Some of the dialogue for *The Wire* came directly from police case files, wiretap transcripts, and real conversations with real Baltimore residents.

As such, it seems difficult to believe that scriptwriters would put in so little effort for something as culturally dominant as football. As journalist Jack Pitt-Brooke noted recently, football in the UK is something you have to opt out of: if you don't like it, you feel the need to declare it in a social situation. Given all of that, it makes even less sense that TV football dialogue is so unrelentingly unnatural. "Football is so pervasive in society that there's no excuse to get it wrong," says Hurrey. "It's all in front of you anyway. It seems to me—from a non-scriptwriter's perspective—that it's harder to get it wrong than to get it right."

But according to Paris-based writer Sean McMahon, football's popularity might actually work against it. It's so culturally pervasive that everybody thinks they understand it and have a connection to it.

"When you're writing screenplays or plays, you should really be using primary sources [for research]: you would be listening to archival stuff, for example," he explains. "And so I think when people write about football, because they think they already have this understanding of it, they're not doing the level of research they should be doing."

McMahon adds that screenwriters may also go too far when incorporating football chat into dialogue, which makes it sound clunky and unnatural. "In theatre writing and screenwriting, a lot of it is supposed to be about showing, not telling. And when people write about football, maybe they panic and they think they have to explain stuff so that people who don't know football can understand what they're talking about."

Hurrey points out that some of this sloppy dialogue may also be down to 'football-illiterate' actors. Colin Firth reportedly went on a crash course on football lingo before portraying Paul Ashworth in the film adaptation of *Fever Pitch*. But that's unlikely to ever be enough to match a lifetime of hardened football chat. "It's hard to go from 0 to 60 with that sort of stuff," says Hurrey. "You have to have grown up as a football fan to understand the cadence of how

football fans talk. There are so many aspects of it to get right, and even a moderate football fan is going to pick up straight away on unnatural football chat."

This throws up an interesting theory. Around [two-thirds](#) of the TV industry come from homes where the main breadwinner had a managerial and professional background. This figure is significantly higher than for the national workforce as a whole, and seemingly at odds with the football's traditional working-class roots. Might it be that these predominantly middle-and upper-class scriptwriters were less exposed to the linguistics of football growing up, and therefore struggle to get the intricacies of football fan chat right? After all, if the workforce behind a show is unrepresentative of the audience they're serving, what they produce is likely to be unrepresentative too.

McMahon agrees, based on his experience in the industry, that there's probably a class element at play. "I worked in theatre, and I was maybe the only person who ever talked about or was interested in football. So it makes sense to me that many people who get into the arts aren't into football."

He also believes that the perception of football in the arts also contributes to this phenomenon. It's simply not taken as seriously as it should by the 'non-believers'.

"In culture, I think people use football as a shorthand for: this is a bloke, and he talks about football because he's a bloke," Sean adds. "But there's nothing deeper than that. So it's never part of the character development or the plot."

Though examples of good football dialogue are rare, they do exist. Jim Broadbent's anti-Manchester United [diatribe](#) in *The Street* lives long in the memory for many ("How I hate your *fucking* team!"). And directors such as Mike Leigh prove that achieving natural dialogue on everyday topics is more than possible. "There's no reason why football dialogue couldn't be like that as well," says Hurrey.

So what's the solution? For one, McMahon reckons using a football consultant for TV shows and films isn't as outlandish a concept as it might sound. "It's that big a topic, and the language of football is so diverse that it makes sense to me."

Change might also come about because of the shifting identity of football fans: less working class, more middle class. Over time, this may lead to a better understanding in the creative industries of how dyed-in-the-wool footy fans talk.

Maybe, though, as football obsessives, we're just expecting a little too much. Football chat is so impenetrable, so unique, so deeply weird itself, that it's a devilishly difficult thing to get right—perhaps even for fans themselves.

"We have to accept that we're coming at this from the perspective of hardened football fans, and we're always going to detect these minor ripples in the cadence of football speak," says Hurrey. "And maybe if you stuck me in a scriptwriter's room, I'd find it difficult to come up with an authentic football conversation. Maybe it just doesn't exist."