

Colour me...



It can be argued that football shirts are the product of progression rather than design. Every article of clothing evolves in the context of its environment and, even after moving the game on from its 'village versus village' origins, the members of an early football team would probably have played in their everyday shirts merely removing jacket, collar and tie as a concession to the physical effort involved. The environment then, as now, was composed of body heat, perspiration and abrasion.

The elements of personal hygiene coupled to social acceptability dictated a rapid progression to the provision of, at least, a specific shirt in which to play football. Initially this was probably white(ish) cotton or linen, with the added identifier of a coloured scarf or similar tied around the waist. The physical environment remained much the same, of the players' own making and controlled by the amount of energy put into the game. Coloured shirts probably evolved out of the necessity for more positive identification as game play speeded up. A mixture of the teams' social environment and local traditions influenced the choice of colours. Thus a particular religious affinity, a major employer's coloured workwear, a regional regiment's dress uniform or even the favours sported by a local family tracing its roots into antiquity, have all provided the basis for the design of a team strip.

In a social sense the primary function of colour is to signify the individuality of the club and its members in relation to any other club already in existence. The team must benefit from a high level of recognition on the playing field and provide the supporters with an equally strong identification as an indication of their allegiance.

The zoologist Desmond Morris published his book *The Soccer Tribes* in 1981. In its pages, he discussed the anthropological aspect in the choice of colours by teams. In search of a hidden logic that might have governed the choice, Morris produced substantial evidence of two fundamental characteristics of colour. The first is specific identity - on the basis of which the teams and their supporters differentiate themselves from the rest of the world. The second is the complex question of psychological advantage based on vividness and contrast. In Nature, insects and many invertebrates rely on a display of intense colour, reds and yellows allied to black, for example; on the pitch the club's adopted colours may also be so designed or placed on the body as to appear more aggressive and provoke apprehension in its opponents. This obviously begs the question of two teams in immediate opposition, both adopting the same strategy.

Analysis of the playing strips of the major European teams shows that blue is the most popular colour in the United Kingdom, red in France



and Italy, yellow in Germany. The most favoured combination is black and white, followed closely by red and blue. The latter, however, only really caught on in France, where presumably the influence of the colours of the national flag plays a part in its popularity, and in Italy. Green is the least favoured, although any UK team that carries Irish lineage may well sport the green as a gesture of solidarity with home and religion.

Despite an apparently hard and fast initial decision on colour and design, in reality the club shirt has had to bow to the pressures of duplication on the pitch, occasional international ambiguity and commercial realism. Away match, or second, strips are necessary to deal with the first two problems; a change of shirt design or colour layout (more or less every two years) appeases the last.

An excellent example of the effects of all three pressures can be seen in the shirt history of the English football club Newton Heath. On establishment in 1892, the club colours were red and white quartered shirts and blue shorts. During the two years between 1894 to 1896, it took to the field in green and gold, which were in turn superseded by a white shirt and, once more, blue shorts.

The club struggled in its placing in the Second Division of the newly formed English football league, and it wasn't until 1902 and a change of name and strip that fortune began to favour its endeavours. In that year it became Manchester United and adopted probably the most famous strip in the world - red shirts and white shorts. Over succeeding years the club has attempted to change its home colours on a number of occasions: a white shirt with a red V between 1922 and 1927, maroon with white hoops in 1934. It has always returned to the red and white base, and now the supporters have invested the colour scheme with a high level of superstitious awe. This is in spite of the fact that some of Manchester United's finest victories have been gained in alternate colour schemes: 1948 Football Association Cup winners in dark blue; 1968 winners of the European Cup in royal blue; 1991 European Cup Winners Cup in white.

Traditionally the club reverses its home strip for away games, adding a third blue strip for the occasions when white clashes with a host team. [The third strip for 2002, its Centenary year, will - of course - be gold.] Only on one infamous occasion has the club moved from this system. In the 1995/96 season the teams away strip was grey and it failed to record a single win whilst wearing it. Grey was removed from the options after a mere nine months and has never been used again by Manchester United or any other British club. 🌐

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