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I don't recall much about the football that first afternoon. One of those tricks of memory enables me to see the only goal clearly: the referee awards a penalty (he runs into the area, points a dramatic finger, there's a roar); a hush as Terry Neill takes it, and a groan as Gordon Banks dives and pushes the ball out; it falls conveniently at Neill's feet and this time
5 he scores. But I'm sure this picture has been built up from what I have long known about similar incidents, and actually I was aware of none of this. All I really saw on the day was a bewildering chain of incomprehensible incidents, at the end of which everyone around me stood and shouted. If I did the same, it must have been an embarrassing ten seconds after the rest of the crowd.

10 But I do have other, more reliable, and probably more meaningful memories. I remember the overwhelming maleness of it all - cigar and pipe smoke, foul language (words I had heard before, but not from adults, not at that volume), and only years later did it occur to me that this was bound to have an effect on a boy who lived with his mother and sister; and I remember looking at the crowd more than at the players. From where I was sitting I could
15 probably have counted twenty thousand heads; only the sports fan (or Mick Jagger or Nelson Mandela) can do that. My father told me that there were nearly as many people in the stadium as lived in my town, and I was suitably awed.

(We have forgotten that football crowds are still astonishingly large, mostly because since the war they have become progressively smaller. Managers frequently complain about
20 local apathy, particularly when their mediocre First or Second Division team has managed to avoid a good hiding for a few weeks; but the fact that, say, Derby County managed to attract an average crowd of nearly seventeen thousand in 1990/91, the year they finished bottom of the First Division, is a miracle. Let's say that three thousand of these are away supporters; that means that among the remaining fourteen thousand from Derby, there were a number of
25 people who went at least eighteen times to see the worst football of last or indeed most other seasons. Why, really, should anyone have gone at all?).

It wasn't the size of the crowd which impressed me the most, however, or the way that adults were allowed to shout the word 'WANKER!' as loudly as they wanted without attracting any attention. What impressed me most was just how much most of the men around
30 me hated, really hated, being there. As far as I could tell, nobody seemed to enjoy, in the way that I understood the word, anything that happened during the entire afternoon. Within minutes of the kick-off there was real anger ('You're a DISGRACE, Gould. He's a DISGRACE!' A hundred quid a week? A HUNDRED QUID A WEEK! They should give that to me for watching you. '); as the game went on, the anger turned to outrage, and then seemed
35 to curdle into sullen, silent discontent. Yes, yes, I know all the jokes. What else could I have expected at Highbury? But I went to Chelsea and to Tottenham and to Rangers, and saw the same thing: that the natural state of the football fan is bitter disappointment, no matter what

