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GRIEF IN FOOTBALL

by Felix Tamsut @ftamsut

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https://www.trauerundfussball.de/wp-content/uploads/grief_in_football.pdf



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Death is an integral part of life, they say. Reminders that human beings are mortal are everywhere. Through street names, monuments or cemeteries, mankind tries to keep the memory of those who are no longer with us going.

Football is no different. Rituals such as the minute's silence and the black armband are commonplace during games; Fans commemorate their legends and fellow supporters through choreographies, flags and other gestures; Clubs retire numbers after deceased club legends.

But most of all, grief belongs to the people feeling it rather than the collective. For one Berlin football fan, the two are inseparable.

Carmen Mayer is a season ticket holder at Bundesliga side Turbine Potsdam. She resides in Berlin, where she often goes groundhopping with her friends. Her lifelong project: Documenting the connection between grief and football under the name 'Trauer und Fußball (literally: Grief and Football). Since the project's initiation in 2006, Mayer and her colleagues have been documenting actions by clubs and fans, as well as media articles about how grief culture comes across through the beautiful game.

Like the grief itself, the idea for the project came through personal experiences. In 2006, Mayer lost her unborn child through pregnancy complications. Two years later, Mayer experienced another stillbirth.

The summer following her first stillbirth, Mayer often used to have friends over for watching the World Cup together. The football was an excuse for her to have people over, again and again, keeping her company, talking, grieving together. It was rather similar when, a few months after her baby's life ended before they even started, the 2008 Euros were on television. "I noticed how people use football as a source of strength during such a difficult time," she remembers.

During her time of grief, Mayer found comfort in football. A few months after losing her first baby, the World Cup came to town. That's when she discovered the effect a football game could have, the distraction, that feeling that for those 90 minutes, nothing else matters apart from what's happening on the pitch.

"I wrote an essay about the topic and we thought we'd start a website with it to see how people react and how it will develop," Mayer says. Since then, she has been writing, researching and collecting evidence as to how grief is being expressed through football.

"In society, grief is often something personal. Society could learn a lot from how openly grief is being shown, and how it's accepted to grieve together, how visible sorrow and grief are in football. If there's any other area of society where grief is being expressed so openly, I'm not aware of it," she says.

Among the many aspects of the combination between death, grief and football documented by Mayer are choreographies by fan groups in memory of deceased supporters. Another example, she says, are ultra groups which organize a football tournament in memory of their friends who passed away. In some cases, supporters in Germany have stopped supporting their teams after a fan had passed away on the way as a show of solidarity.

Nowadays, Carmen Mayer has been giving lectures across Germany about the connection between grief and football, her personal story and her life mission: documenting, researching and writing about how world football expresses sorrow and grief.

Much has changed since she began collecting news reports in 2006. The Berlin-based project now has six staff members, with some of them being volunteers. Mayer also works as a grief counselor.

One of the things that drew Mayer into the world of football was how different and diverse it is, mostly in the stands. Some people, she says, feel more connected to their lost loved ones through a visit to the stadium, where the deceased used to stand and support their team, than they do visiting their graves. The ways grief is being expressed are just as diverse as the football fans expressing it, she says. Through shedding light on football's remembrance culture, Mayer says it sometimes causes people to rethink their perception of football fans after learning how they commemorate the deceased, with some of them deciding to go to a game and notice such nuances themselves.

“When people think about football fans, they always think of drunk, violent people. Through their expression of grief, be it a fellow fan or a club legend, you can see how there's a lot more to football fans than just the stereotype.”

Since she started going to football herself, Mayer also noticed how different rituals in and around a matchday are related to remember those who are no longer with us. She tells of Turbine Potsdam season ticket holder who passed away, and whose seat still remains empty to this day. Everytime his friends make their way to Potsdam's Karl-Liebknecht-Stadion, where both Turbine Potsdam and fourth division side SV Babelsberg play, they're reminded of him through looking at the bus stop where they used to meet.

Those who visit Mayer's Berlin home would see two shirts. Lena, number one, and Friedrich, number two. They may have not gotten to become footballers themselves, but Carmen Mayer and her family made sure to commemorate them. Through football shirts, of course.

Through her project, Mayer and her staff are living proof to the truth in what German philosopher Immanuel Kant once said: Only those who are forgotten are really dead.

The Trauer und Fußball website can be viewed at www.trauerundfussball.de