

The heart of the matter

Stefan Howald, PFFC's longest-serving player, reflects on the literal and metaphorical significance of the heart within football.

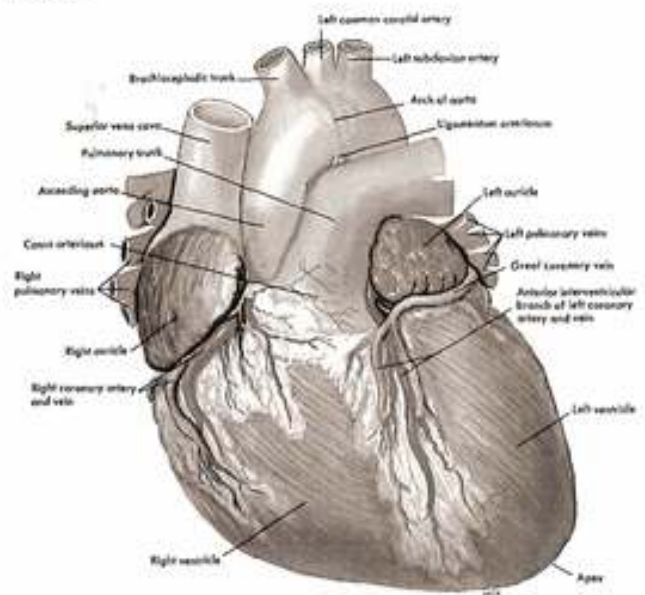
The heart was never in doubt. Football was my first love. I played it as a child in the meadows in front of our flat in a Swiss village on the outskirts of Zürich, and later with the newly founded youth team of the village, which in its first season had to play against youth teams of the likes of FC Zürich and Grasshoppers Zürich, losing 15-1 and 12-0 respectively.

My love has been tinged with loss and recovery. I abandoned football for the first time when I went to Zürich to join the grammar school, but returned to it during university. Although, with a hitch: my mind was now Left, with a capital L, where the heart always had been. So there were reservations against football. True, it used to be a proletarian activity, but on the other hand didn't competitive sport strengthen the dominant principle of capitalist society and function as another opiate of the masses? So I joined a team in the alternative Swiss championship, newly set up by left-wing parties and collectives. Some of my team-mates, however, were more into the social aspect of the game than the sporting one.

I abandoned alternative football for a place in a team of the bourgeois newspaper I was starting to work on. I even tried to get on with a right-wing colleague from the newspaper because you can't really form a successful partnership up front if you ignore each other for ideological or other reasons. I abandoned football when I was no longer able to deliver a corner to the far post and was dropped from the first team.

For several years I tried volleyball. I even tried it in England,

Fig. 16-2 Anterior view of the heart and great vessels.



which led me into strange encounters in communal halls in South London with other foreigners from Poland or Bangladesh.

So I returned to football. Philosophy Football, that is, the ideal combination of heart and mind. During the first friendly in Regent's Park it didn't even rain. For several heart-warming years, I crossed London from the East to the North to the South, from the doldrums of Mile End to the dizzy heights of Crystal Palace.

But then my heart became a medical issue.

Some ten years ago, during a routine health check, my doctor had discovered a coronary insufficiency. A specialist confirmed it. I was lying on a hospital trolley and watching my heart on the computer screen, a strange lump, stirring and pumping, flown through by different colours: red, the fresh blood entering the heart, and blue, the amount of blood which flew



Philosophy Football's first and finest Player of the Decade, Stefan Howald.

backwards because of a weakened valve. A tear nestled in my eye and I wrote a piece in my newspaper about hearts and tears, at which a former girlfriend of mine phoned me, calling it a piece of male vanity, which I felt unable to deny.

Since then I have had to have my heart checked every year. To the amazement of my doctor, and to my own slight irritation, it

didn't impede me. My aching and ageing legs gave way long before my breath. But slowly the heart deteriorated, the moderate insufficiency becoming a distinct and then a significant insufficiency. My doctor decided it was time to fix the leak. So I moved back to Switzerland and delivered myself under the knife of the surgeon. Three months later, I started playing football again. Softly and gingerly, but heart and scar were holding: my legs gave way long before my breath.

So, the heart has never been the issue. But which matter is the issue of which the heart is the matter? Philosophy? Or football? Or this strange, enticing mongrel called Philosophy Football?

After several playing years and several events and several trips and several articles propagating the connection between culture and football, I am still not quite convinced if there is really a connection. True, one can talk a philosophical game and one can talk about the socio-cultural relevance of sport, but at the end of the day one has to show his heart on the sleeves of his football shirt.

In October 2003, in Pordenone, an Anglo-Swiss team, combined from Philosophy Football and my new Swiss team, FC Levante, defeated an Italian team. Their manager, an Englishman who had organised our trip with great enthusiasm and hospitality, was slightly miffed about the result. And I can understand him very well. Just taking part is not everything. Sometimes, one has to win as well.

Living with contradictions, without betraying one or the other side of the contradiction: I think that is all we can achieve.

With Philosophy Football one can achieve and live it just a little bit better.