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Clock is ticking for Theresa May's Brexit deal 03:25

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(CNN) — A recent thrilling clash between Liverpool and Manchester City, the top two teams in the English Premier League this season, was more than merely a game. It was an embodiment of a generation's worth of globalization and openness, and a warning against jeopardizing that progress with Britain's clumsy march toward, what in soccer terms, would be a political and economic own goal: Brexit, [its divorce from Europe](#), scheduled to take place [March 29](#).



The English Premier League, the closest thing the world's most popular sport has to a global all-star league, reflects the cultural and economic power of sport. Political analysts are at times too quick to dismiss the importance of sports off the playing field, but as recent Colin Kaepernick-triggered debates in the United States over the NFL players' anti-racism protests remind us, sports are a canvas on which our most pressing social and cultural issues come to life in stark relief. Sport is a visceral way tribal fans connect to place, and each other -- a compass with which they situate themselves in the world.

suggest. American leagues like the NFL, MLB and NBA [continue](#) to expand their international fan bases, playing games overseas, and seeking to attract more foreign players to their ranks. But nowhere is the parochial lurch in politics more at odds with sports-related globalization than in Britain, where globalization is revolutionizing the national game (some say religion) -- and the game is conversely helping to reassert English cultural power across the globe.

Last week's Liverpool-Manchester City match, for example, [was televised](#) in more than 175 countries, accessible to more than 1 billion households. The players on the field [represented](#) 13 nationalities, coached by two of the best (and most charismatic) managers in the business, a German and a Catalan. They are employed by two of the most ambitious sports tycoons anywhere: Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan from Abu Dhabi and John Henry, the Bostonian financier who also owns the Boston Red Sox.



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pushed for and [invested in](#) improved sport infrastructure as a result, coinciding with the infusion of Rupert Murdoch TV riches, as the media tycoon saw in the Premier League compelling content to grow his Sky TV service within Britain and overseas.



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featuring the world's best players (America's own Christian Pulisic [just became](#) the biggest US star to sign with an English club). Meanwhile, the fact that these games are played in iconic venues (some nearly a century old) filled with fans whose families have been chanting the same songs for generations seems to scratch fans' itch for "locally sourced" authenticity. Owners like John Henry and Sheikh Mansour walk a tightrope, acting as both

One of the British empire's late overseers, Sir Richard Turnbull, a high commissioner of Aden in the 1960s, [famously said](#) that for all its global power and influence, the empire would leave behind only two enduring legacies to the world: the game of football and the expression to "f*** off." It's true that much of the world plays the sport first popularized by the English working class, but in the decades immediately following Turnbull's comment, it appeared that England would become a backwater in the sport it had bequeathed the world. The Spanish and Italian leagues were of far greater importance, and in international competition, England over time became decidedly second-tier, behind the likes of Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Germany and even the Netherlands.

It was only in the 1990s that England reasserted its claim to be a global football hub, [rebranding](#) its top division as the Premier League in response to a series of violent tragedies that had brought the game into serious disrepute. The government

What's more, English teams were suddenly free to spend these funds on foreign talent when European courts [struck down](#) previous caps on the number of foreign players (at least as they applied to fellow Europeans). The confident, open-to-the-world "cool Britannia" vibe of the Tony Blair years further set out the welcome mat for foreign investors eager to acquire English teams. Foreign owners [own almost three-quarters](#) of all Premier League teams, and five of what are commonly referred to as the "big six" (the dominant, bigger-spending) teams, and in the first month of the competition this season, English players accounted for [less than a third](#) of all playing time.

The English Premier League has thus become a metaphor and case study for globalization, as fans in stadiums across England and watching on TV around the world (including on NBC in America) are transfixed by a competitive league

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unfettered trade in order to protect England's own. But the argument that England is being hurt by so many foreign players has lost its potency in the past couple of years (since the Brexit vote, come to think of it), as English national teams in 2017 [won](#) the U-20 and U-17 FIFA World Cups for the first time. Then last summer, the senior team was the [first English squad](#) to make a World Cup semifinal since 1990.

There may be fewer English players starting in the Premier League than ever before, but those who do play alongside the world's best players, and are coached by the world's best coaches, and that shows in the development of such stars as Raheem Sterling, Harry Kane, Dele Alli, and Phil Foden. The English game has become more versatile thanks to the synthesis of the best playing and thinking from Latin America, Africa, and the continent.

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The league is now also a reflection of a nation divided between its multicultural resources and the isolationist desires of some of its citizens. The game has broadened many fans' worldview and cultural empathy. The Egyptian striker and prolific goal scorer Mo Salah is a hero in Liverpool these days, and [fans love to chant](#) that if he scores a few more, they will become Muslims too. Likewise, the multiracial English national team projects to the world (and to English youth) a profoundly diverse version of the country. But, reflecting cruder nativist politics on both sides of the Atlantic, some clubs like Chelsea [are struggling to crack down](#) on ugly expressions of racism by some fans.

Some say this level of openness to outside talent crowds out domestic players, diminishing opportunities for them, thereby hurting the English national team. It's a similar debate to those around manufacturing and protectionism in the United States and elsewhere, with calls in some quarters to erect barriers to

So the game of football, England's most important cultural export these days, provides an allegory of the benefits of openness. And yet, as of March 30, absent any new developments, the Premier League will be in peril, as many of its players will technically no longer be entitled to work in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the Football Association, which governs all levels of the sport in England, [is pressing](#) the Premier League to revisit and reimpose stricter limits on the numbers of foreign players to conform with the spirit of Brexit.

But so far, the Premier League is avoiding the conversation altogether, hoping English fans (voters, parliamentarians) come to their senses.