

Do fans really not understand this deal's downside?

Paul
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THE Corona crisis has seen me locked down in the UK, so I easily forget that I work abroad. As a migrant, your links back home are critical in maintaining a sense of balance and identity in your life.

One of my most important links home in the last decade has been Newcastle United. It started inauspiciously, when just before I emigrated in 2010, we were relegated.

In those technologically backward days, TV coverage meant staying up till Sunday's wee hours for the Football League show. It was a great season for a fan, a team performance we could be proud of, and few hints of the owner's later ruthless streak.

Since then, being an NUFC fan has been a rollercoaster ride. I was delighted that a 2013 UEFA Cup quarter final fell together with the Newcastle beer festival, and I still remember clearly through a real ale haze the stunning moment of beautiful devastation when Benfica's late goal knocked us out.

But, being honest, our annual battle against relegation has had more lows than highs. And there's been growing disappointment in an owner content to run the club for his own benefit and interests.

So when rumours emerged of a nearing done-deal for the club, I was overcome by relief, joining hundreds of thousands of Newcastle fans longing for a change.

But when the latest details emerged in January, my excitement turned to sickness. The club was going to be sold to Saudi-led consortium funded by their national Hydrocarbon fund.

Saudi interest in our club is clear - their government are buying good publicity to hide bad deeds. There's international pressure on their human rights abuses abroad, whether luring journalists in Turkey to torture and death, or stoking a humanitarian catastrophe in the Yemeni civil war.

Amnesty International aren't known for grinding axes, and when they complain about something then you stop and listen. They made public their worries that the under-fire Saudi government was buying Newcastle United as a cynical PR exercise.

Sport's role in burnishing tarnished images

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explains the 1980s sporting and cultural boycott of South Africa. Sport's political neutrality provided a podium for that hateful regime to win friendly coverage from an uncritical press pack.

The English cricketers on the 1982 rebel tour to South Africa were paid handsomely for their treachery. But the blood money they received tarnished their careers, and the results were expunged from the records.

So I've been shocked in the takeover's friendly reception by Toon fans, where criticism is seen as treachery. The social media hashtag #cans, toasting the sale, has seen a rush of Saudi regime-friendly postings and positive sentiment for this rogue state.

I can understand the yearning for Ashley to leave, but I'm stunned that people don't see that this is so much worse. Fans who took a moral stand against the always law-biding Ashley are rushing to embrace and celebrate a murderous tyranny.

I thought we were better than that, that our fans had a moral compass. Or would at least see the downside: being owned by a tarnished regime desperate for publicity makes our club vulnerable.

Attacking the club becomes an easy way for enemies to wage wars against the Saudi state by other means. They can embarrass the owners in public, draw out UEFA sanctions for politicising the game, tie the club down in litigation, and make us unappealing to star players and managers of the #cans crowd's dreams.

Our pain will be their gain. So think hard, fans, before you get on the #cans, whether this takeover will make us proud of our club.

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but I don't stick to the photograph necessarily.

"As soon as I start painting I'll make adjustments, add or subtract stuff or sand things down.

"If I don't get it right, I'll put the painting away and try something else. I tend to have 20 or 30 unfinished paintings in the studio."

A finished painting, while not showing an actual location, will capture the mood of the landscape and hint at the forces which shaped it.

To get to this point, Sam likes to "mess around" with paints, varnishes and even his surfaces. Recycled rough board salvaged from around Highgreen became his "canvas" in many cases.

"With my varnishes I might create a very shiny surface or maybe a very muddied, distorted one with a wrinkly skin. All these things might rub up against each other.

"I always play around and I like it to be a bit out of my control. I'm not one of those people who make a



► Sam Douglas in Northumberland

painting in a day and is really focused. Maybe I should be but I'm a bit haphazard.

"I don't have a certain amount of paint that I'll use on a certain painting. Things come and go and leave

their traces. Often I don't know how I got to a certain point because there'll be this build-up of elements."

Some of the paintings begun in Northumberland will, at some point in the future, be pulled out and reworked.

But if Sam must soon move on, he can now say with certainty: "This is an area I'd come back to."

You can see some of his Northumberland paintings at <https://varc.org.uk/entwined> where you can also find out more about the Entwined programme.

It is also the place to follow the progress of artist number two, Shane Finan, who was to have spent April working at Northumberland Wildlife Trust's Kielderhead Wildlife project.

His residency has been postponed but he has begun work on his multimedia project looking at networks - natural, social and technological - and his first video is online.