

Transcript of 'The Sustainable Game?'

Season 3, Episode 16, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: How large and complex is football's carbon footprint? And what steps can clubs and players take to become more sustainable?

Plus, we'll find out which pop star our guest thinks Jan is the most like.

[Theme music]

When's the last time you were on the terraces, Jan?

Jan: Uh, in the mid-1990s.

Paul: Now, I have to double check with you. When we're talking about terraces, are you referring to places where they grow rice and things like this...?

Jan: ...no...

Paul: ...in, uh, Southeast Asia? Or are you actually referring to what I'm referring to?

Jan: I think I'm referring to what you're referring to. I saw Dundee, United versus Aberdeen. My heart had just been broken by a boy, and then somebody, uh, took me to the football to cheer me up, and it did because nothing could be worse than watching that game.

Paul: Yes, it, it made you realise. That breaking up with someone was absolutely fine after watching Dundee United. [Jan laughs]

Jan: Well, I, I didn't have to support either team...

Paul: ...yes, yeah...

Jan: ...so apologies to Dundee United and Aberdeen fans, but that's the only like, uh, uh, soccer, football game that I've ever seen.

Paul: So, Tannadice is the only stadium you've ever been to...

Jan: ...yes...

Paul: ...to watch a game of football?

Jan: Yeah. I should get out more, I agree.

Paul: Yeah, well for a start, I mean there's another stadium about 200 yards down the road from Tannadice, [Jan laughs] you could have just gone down there and see if that was any better, but no.

Jan: ...yeah ...

Paul: ...yeah well, it's interesting...

Jan: ...but are you interested in football, Paul?

Paul: I've always been interested in football, Jan. I've spent more of my life than I care to imagine at football stadiums. As you are aware, I spent 15, 16 years as a football reporter, so, you know, I've, I've been there, done it all through the lower leagues. I've, I've covered matches everywhere from a field where there was me and about five other people watching, to Wembley Stadium. So, you know, there's a, a big range there of places I've been to.

I will say though, I do prefer standing on the terraces than I do sitting in the stands.

Jan: Ah, yeah. I've, I've been, um, I stood on the terraces to see New Zealand versus the Barbarians when Cardiff Arms Park still had terraces and that was quite a unique experience. Um, I don't think it's available anymore in many places.

Paul: No. That, that would be Rugby Union, which is not what we're talking about today.

Jan: [laughs] And not, but look, I bought you a football person, so you have to like me this time...

Paul: [laughing] ...you don't even know how to describe the football people, do you?

A football...

Jan and Paul in unison: ...person?

Jan: I bought you a fellow football obsessive. And so you um, should have, you should thank me for this.

Paul: You're gonna make me talk about sustainability when it comes to football as well...

Jan: ...absolutely...

Paul: ...we're not just gonna sit here for the next 45 minutes, discussing our favourite moments on the terraces...

Jan: ...no, no...

Paul: ...the various, you know, ups and downs of following Barrow AFC and Newcastle United and like, yeah. It'll be a bit, a bit different, that.

Jan: It is, it is. So who have we got?

Paul: Yes. We're joined today by Dr. Idlan Zakaria, who is an Associate Professor in Accounting at the University of Birmingham, your old stomping ground.

Jan: Indeed.

Paul: And she's an ex-colleague of yours as well...?

Jan: ...yes...

Paul: ...so it's not just that, you know, happened to be there, she actually knows you and still she's turned up.

Jan: Yeah, it's a mystery...

Paul: ...and a, a graduate of this here university here at Lancaster, and someone who's put us in touch with various people in Malaysia through the past...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...um, before Christmas we spoke to Nik Nazmi, and that's thanks to Idlan.

But importantly, for the purposes of this podcast, passionate about football and sustainability.

It's bringing our two loves together, Jan.

Jan: It is, indeed...

Paul: ...it is. Welcome, Idlan.

Idlan: Hi Paul. Hi Jan. Thank you for having me.

Paul: You're welcome.

I want to know how someone who is obsessed with football can be a friend of Jan's. I've wondered this myself, how it's been Jan's interest in sport, football especially, non-existent.

Idlan: I led with the sustainability, but I am actually one of those people who actually read a lot of the work that Jan did before I even knew what she looked like.

And when she moved into the office next door to me at Birmingham, a little bit starstruck. You know, a bit like seeing Taylor Swift in the stands kind of thing.

Jan: I'm the Taylor Swift of the accounting world. I can live with that.

Paul: And when Idlan says one of the people, [Jan laughs] I think that we've now found one, there's one more out there somewhere that we need, need to find who's... you've been compared to Taylor Swift.

Jan: I'm there. I've always liked Idlan. Always said she's a wonderful person. Great, great judgment, character...

Paul: ...yeah, I've said this before when we've had your friends on this podcast. They should have been briefed before we come, that they don't have to be nice to you. [Jan laughs]

Jan: Well, it was really great having a, a chance to connect with Idlan at Birmingham. And in particular to find out actually more about football, [Paul laughs] 'cause I'm, I'm not very on the ball with that, if you'll excuse the pun...

Paul: ...football, football, Jan falls asleep. But it's connected to sustainability, ooh...

Jan: ...yes, indeed. So, uh, let, let's start off with, um, a little bit about your background. So our listeners kind of know where you've come from and, and you've got a really interesting hybrid life between Malaysia and the UK, um, both in your, your younger years, but also in later years as well. And then that lovely connection with Lancaster.

Idlan: Yeah. So, while I don't sound like it, um, I was born in Malaysia and we as a family moved to the UK, specifically Durham, when I was six and lived here until I was about 11.

And then I went back home to Malaysia for high school, came back here again, um, here literally, to Lancaster for, um, my postgraduate degrees. So I've always, almost like feel like I've got, um, one foot in each country, so to speak.

I've picked up, um, a terrible array of accents along the way, [Jan laughs] so I have no idea what accent I'm gonna be, um, featuring today on this podcast.

But I came to Lancaster, um, for my masters and I was lucky enough to be given a grant, um, by the Department of Accounting and Finance for my PhD. And so I kind of stayed on to do that.

Jan: So, but what about the football then? Where, where did the love of football begin? Was it when you were six and you arrived in this country, or has it always been there?

Idlan: I want to say that it was because we lived in the part of the country where, you know, it's just football. It's, you know, you. Newcastle's just down the road. But actually my first memory of football was actually watching the 1982 World Cup.

I was very young, but you know, guess people gonna do some maths now. But, um, I was watching it with family. It's a big feature of, um, watching live sports, big feature of my family.

Moved abroad. Then my dad decided that it wasn't a thing for girls to play football. So he said, no, you can't play football. And that's really when the obsession started because I started to find other ways to engage with the game that didn't involve me, you know, getting in trouble for running around a pitch.

And so stats, games, books, whatever. And I think that stuck, um, all the way through life 'til today, I think.

Paul: And you ended up supporting Newcastle United.

Idlan: No.

Paul: No. Jan, you told me she was a, a Newcastle United fan...

Jan: ...I said she's a good Geordie, I didn't say...

Paul: ...well, if you're a good Geordie, that involves being a Newcastle United fan. If you are not a Newcastle United fan, you're not a good Geordie...

Jan: ...but, but Jason Harrison is also from the, the area and he doesn't support Newcastle United either, 'cause he doesn't know what it is...

Paul: ...well, there...

Idlan: ...there is a backstory to, to that though. [Jan laughs]

She did get half of the team right, 'cause she did say United, but it's Manchester United...

Paul: ...ah...

Idlan: ...and the reason why it went there was because, um, everybody in school were actually either Newcastle United or Liverpool fans.

And there was this poor lad who was a Man United fan and nobody wanted to be friends with him because he was...

Paul: ...there's good reason for that. I'll say they were justified.

Jan: ...settle down, settle down...

Idlan: ...and so in the end I decided that, um, I'd be Andrew's friend and, um, caught the United bug, for better or for worse. But, you know, times change and in life, in love and in football, you can get divorced.

So falling out of love perhaps, these days with everything, the corporate shenanigans that are going on. So I, I have a careful eye on that united, but yeah, not probably as rabid as I was when I was about 17.

Paul: Do you not have a team anymore then?

Idlan: I follow Arsenal Women's.

Paul: Okay.

Idlan: But that's just like a, the first women's team that I knew...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Idlan: ...about 10 years ago. But then I also go and watch pretty much most of the women's...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Idlan: ...teams in and around Birmingham. There's Birmingham City and Aston Villa. And if you've really kind of, um, show me that here is a game there and I can afford to pay the tickets for it, I'll probably be there.

Jan: That's very cool.

But also you did get onto playing later in life, um, and also helping other people play well.

Idlan: Yeah, my, my little bit of playing actually links with Lancaster, 'cause I turned out for the Lancaster University Women's Football Club in 2001, 2002, and actually ended up going to The Roses, which was in York that year.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Idlan: I don't think we won, but...

Paul: ...no, we didn't. I was there...

Idlan: ...ah...!

Jan: ...aaah...

Paul: ...and, uh, I, I was covering said events, yes. And I can say that Lancaster did not win.

Idlan: Well, there you go. Um, but yeah. Um, so a bit later, um, in life, I guess I would've got a bit older. Decided that, you know, I wanted to stay in the game. Obviously it wasn't because of the lack of talent, but just the lack of opportunity that meant that I couldn't, you know, represent myself at the highest level.

So I thought I'd cut my losses and realised that maybe another way in was there, so started coaching. Took some coaching badges in 2016. It was interesting because I was asked to do that as a, to set up a woman's team, but we didn't have this kind of support for women's football in about 2016 as we do today.

So I kind of gave up until about 2021, got back, a lot more support. I now have, um, the next qualification up which is the UEFA C, and I help out at Birmingham FA, um, Birmingham County FA, to grow the women's game in and around the county as well.

Paul: So, we know a lot about football and you now. How does this then tie in with sustainability?

Where have you drawn the connections between football and sustainability, and how?

Idlan: So, for me, sustainability is not something that I see, that I isolate from life. So, so it's part, part of what I do every day.

Part of, you know, guilty of the sins of, you know, not doing the right thing, but also being aware of what you do. And football just came naturally 'cause it, that was part of my life.

And I, I started thinking a lot about, well, if you're talking about, you know, greenhouse gas emissions, look at those players traveling in these jets and all that kind of stuff.

So I started looking into that aspect of it, I don't know, maybe about a decade ago. As things getting picked up by the media, and I mean, it revealed a lot more than I thought. Greenhouse gas emissions are just like the tip of the iceberg.

So I've been trying to sort of then engage with that side of, of football. I research responsible business in general, and sustainability falls under that. And that means that when I have conversations with people, I try to think, well, what have you done about this or that or the other, that helps your, your club or your, your, your, um, organisation, you know, um, think more sustainably.

So it's kind of like, I can't talk about something. If you wanted to talk to me about trains and delays, I'd probably be able to also think about the sustainability angle of that as well, 'cause it's just kind of one of those things where you can't really take it out of the equation. It's always part of the equation one way or another.

Jan: Maybe, can we start then, even though there's so many elements to it, we'll try to isolate some of them out for a conversation for our, our listeners. And then, you know, think about bring, bringing them all together as well.

So shall we start thinking about greenhouse gases and, and that, this is, you know, emissions of, of, um, greenhouse gases from various activities. So how does that play out in the football arena?

Idlan: It plays out in terms, the most obvious source of greenhouse gas emissions in football is travel. People might think it's, you know, other things, waste for example, but it's actually travel.

And this ranges from not just players traveling to and from a particular location to play football, but also fans, fans travel. And then that is amplified when you have events like the Euros or the World Cup, because there are people not just coming from one country or one part of the world.

So that creates a lot of greenhouse gas emissions in the travel, in the travel to the location, but also in the travel between venues in the location. The bigger the country that is holding it, um, the more, the more you have to travel in between venues. For fans, and players and officials and referees and everybody.

So, um, all that travel is the biggest, kind of, most significant contributor to greenhouse gases.

Jan: And then drawing back on your interest on responsible business, who has responsibility for that?

Because as a fan, if I decide I'm gonna fly off somewhere and go and, and do this, then obviously the event's there, but actually I make that choice as well. So that sounds like a really complex responsibility landscape that you just drew out.

Idlan: It is super complex. Because the choices that we make, and this is, this is the kind of choices, these are the kind of choices that you make on so many different things in life.

Do I take my bike or my, or a bus to work today, at that level. It is on, so on the, on the fan level, there is a responsibility to find perhaps the most, um, or the lowest carbon footprint, um, way to travel to, to the game.

Could you get into a bus together instead of driving 20 cars. You know, could you rent a bus, that kind of stuff. Or could you get a train instead of, um, taking a plane if it's within the continent?

But on the higher level, organisations like FIFA and UEFA also have a responsibility because they choose the locations of these events. They set the calendar. They even tell you who gets, how many teams get to play.

There is stuff that we could do at the individual level. There are stuff that clubs can do at the club level, but, or countries could do at the country level. But ultimately the fixture setting, and the games and the, you know, for the biggest type of events, the behest of the organisers.

Paul: Jan, do want to guess how many teams were in a World Cup in the 1970s?

Jan: I could guess, but I'll be hopeless at it. [laughs]

Paul: I'll, I'll help you out. Everything is gonna be divisible by four...

Jan: ...okay...

Paul: ...in this particular, uh, set of questions.

Jan: 16?

Paul: Correct! Well done.

In 1982, this went up to 24. It made for entirely weird complications, and they had weird group stages and stuff that went on through the eighties and the early nineties until 1994, when you had third place teams in a group of four qualifying from group stages into knockout stages.

Then in 1998, they went up to 32 teams. And the 32-team format seemed to be working and it's been 1998 all the way through to the last World Cup in 2022. And I'm gonna come to that World Cup, you better believe me, I'm gonna come to that World Cup a few times in this conversation...

Jan: [laughing] ...I think, I think Idlan's come to that World Cup as well...

Paul: ...and that seemed to be working.

And then to the bafflement of completely everyone, they've now gone to 48 teams. This is almost, not quite, but almost, a quarter of all the football teams, national football teams, in the world will be playing in the World Cup.

It's diluted it, the quality of it, but it also, the argument, counterargument will be, it broadens it so that more people can be included...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...and take part. Most football fans are baffled by it. If you're a sports fan and you're ever baffled by something, you know why it's happened. Money. [Jan laughs] Money is every time the answer to why anything in any sport is going on, you can't figure out why they're doing it. It's all to do with money and that's what's going on.

And money will also have an awful lot to do with some of the places the World Cup has been taking part in. Because whilst Idlan has talked about the vast

distances of travel that there might be in order to reach various World Cups, and the next one is going to be in three different countries, Mexico, America, and Canada. And therefore there's mass amounts of travel...

Jan: ...oh yeah...

Paul: ...thousands of miles between them. The last one took place in a country where all the stadiums were within a radius of about 20 miles from each other. But, that was Qatar. Now in order to play a World Cup in Qatar, they had to move it to winter. They also had to build seven brand new stadiums and totally enhance number eight. They had eight stadiums all within this small bit.

Do you want to guess what FIFA claimed the carbon impact of this World Cup would be?

Jan: No.

Paul: They said it would be carbon neutral. They said this would be a carbon neutral World Cup. Now, officially, afterwards, do you want to guess what the official carbon footprint of that World Cup was in 2022?

Jan: More than zero?

Paul: 3.6 million tonnes of CO2.

Jan: [exhales audibly]

Paul: Now, that's the official figure. Do you want to guess what a lot of independent watchdogs think is the actual figure for the CO2 impact of that World Cup?

Jan: Twice as much?

Paul: Or three times as much...

Jan: ...mmm...

Paul: ...more than 10 million tonnes of CO2. When you talk about who's responsible for overseeing it and making sure that things are done properly and observing it, and we talk about FIFA and such.

It's not necessarily that you can trust them, they're all about the money.

Jan: Yeah. But that does raise an interesting thing, uh, is the stadiums. So these are, um, and what we've talked about in other podcasts, anchor assets in their communities.

So what kind of sustainability issues come up when we're thinking about a, you know, a stadium?

Idlan: When you talk about a stadium, the building of it, if it needs to be built, is fraught with, you know, are you using the right, kinda how far, what's the carbon footprint of the material that you, you're bringing?

But maintaining the stadium afterwards, the pitch needs to be watered. There's water issues in how you, um, in how kind of, um, you manage the pitch and what level of grass it needs, how soft, how wet, how hard, depending on the situation.

There is the actual process of consumption when people come to the stadium. Waste from, let's say, um, single use cups because, um, so if you think about Wembley's got 90,000, 90,000, um, people capacity...

Jan: ...wow, I think...

Idlan: ... even a, let's say a 10,000 capacity stadium, the single use cups, waste water, pitch maintenance, making sure that the pitch is ready for, let's say winter. If, if it gets frozen, what happens? Where you get the water from to be used in the toilets and all that kind of stuff happening on a weekly basis because these stadiums typically host weekly games or fortnightly games depending on, on the league. That's one aspect of it.

The other aspect of it is if you've got a stadium that was built for an event and then it's left there and it's not being used. Then the decay and the waste comes into in a different perspective. So, so legacy of those stadiums.

I mean, Qatar's got a football league due, but they've survived, they didn't need eight, you know, 40,000, 60,000 seater, they're a country of 4 million people. They've got them now. Whatya gonna do with them?

Paul: There was a big thing made, wasn't there in the last World Cup about the fact that one of the stadiums was built to be dismantled?

Idlan: Yes.

Paul: But that's one. That's, that's one that was built as a temporary stadium essentially, which is crazy to think for a World Cup and for something that's hosting, like you say, the minimum capacity has to be 40,000. So anywhere between 40 and 80,000 for all the stadiums that were in Qatar.

You've built one of them just to take it down again at the end of the process. But lots of them, they're just gonna be white elephants.

Jan: I suppose it almost, um, is resonant of some of the problems in around the Olympics as well. And sometimes, you know, whether or not the, the facilities that are built, you have a legacy that lift people into sport and all of the good things that come with that, or whether or not the, the facilities, you know, don't function that way and decay, et cetera.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

You've got different things there. 'Cause you've got say that sort of big issue that's been mentioned about London. Where, has it boosted the part participation in sport that it claimed it was going to? Probably not.

And then you've got, say Athens 2004, a stadium built in a place that's so far out of the way and they just didn't know what to do with it for a long time afterwards.

And you end up with a, that just stadium that's decaying and you've got other stadiums. Montreal, the government, uh, 1976 Montreal in Canada. The amount of money that spent, was spent on that was astronomical and it took them something like 40 years to pay off the debt that they built up. All because of hosting this Olympic event and such, so.

Jan: And I've been to the Montreal Stadium. I was there, I was in Montreal doing some work, and I went there because, uh, in that games there was a, a New Zealand runner called, um, Johnny Walker who did, who won a gold. And it was so unusual for us to win a gold.

I remember as a kid being really, you know, quite sort of made up by it. So I could say 'I was there', and they had...

Paul: ...was he a middle distance runner, something like 1500 or 5,000 metres...?

Jan: ...yeah, yeah...

Paul: ...yeah, yeah, I've heard of him...

Jan: ...yeah, so that's sort of, it's interesting. But also I guess what this brings to mind is, you know, places and stadiums and events, they all have a really strong emotional resonance with us in terms of, so it's not a rational choice.

It's also an, an emotional, enjoyable choice to maybe go and see a particular game or to experience an event, et cetera.

Paul: For someone who's supported Barrow for almost 40 years, I can tell you there's nothing rational about doing that. [Jan laughs] That's, uh, that's certainly the case, yes, yeah.

Jan: And do you have a big stadium?

Paul: No, we really don't. We, uh, talking about temporary stands. When we got promoted to the Football League in the COVID year, actually uh, 2019, 2020, the ground had to be upgraded in order to be in the Football League, 'cause we hadn't been in the football league since 1972. Which is a very sore point for people of a certain era. And anyone who ever mentions Hereford United is not smiled at kindly in, uh, Barrow for that.

But we needed new stands built for people to sit in. And they put up these, um, temporary structures eventually, which look a bit like a gazebo in places. They've got the, the, the roofs that are sort of like rattling in the wind.

As soon as they went up, I turned to my friends on the terraces and said, there's absolutely no chance they are temporary. As soon as they've seen they're there and they're, they stand up and they're not getting blown away in the wind they're gonna be kept and they're gonna be announced as permanent.

What do you know? A month or two later, they were announced as permanent. So we had to upgrade the stadium in order to be of a certain capacity, but it's not big, but it still has an imprint and the amount of plastic rubbish that is created as a result of it, and other issues that are gonna be created because of it.

There's the amount of electricity that must be drained on our floodlights every time...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...we have a Tuesday night game or in the winter and any-time-of-the-day game because it's so dark. There's impact there.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Mmm.

Jan: So, in some ways, if you like, we've, so we looked at travel, we've looked at the stadiums, but, uh, are there, you know, other layers of issues that, that we can peel back and have a wee, wee think about as well?

Idlan: I think another aspect that not a lot of people, um, talk about or think about too much, and partly it's because to do with, you know, irrationality, um, is, um, waste in terms of jerseys.

You know the jerseys that we wear...

Jan: ...oh yeah...

Idlan: ...um, and how much of those actually end up in landfills. Clubs now, when I was a young girl, um, clubs would have a jersey for two years. You'd have, here's your 94-95, 95-96 jersey. Now they come up with three jerseys a season, plus probably a special International Women's Day jersey, or International Men's Day jersey, or a green jersey, or whatever it is that they're trying to celebrate.

Paul: A jersey for playing in Europe...

Idlan: ...yeah.

Paul: A jersey for playing in Cup competitions...

Idlan: ... exactly...

Paul: ...a jersey because it's Tuesday and not Wednesday...

Idlan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...yeah...

[Jan laughs]

Idlan: ...yep. And that, you know, the amount of consumption that comes out of that and the amount of waste, because the material that the jerseys are made from. Typically a polyester, or variations of it.

You, we are thinking about the Adidas of the world, but also, but, but at the same time, the smaller leagues, sorry, the smaller teams that have different jersey manufacturers don't use as high quality material compared to, let's say, you know, the main shirt manufacturers.

I mean, I say this guiltily with, you know, a suitcase half-filled of jerseys that I've had over the years. I just can't, you know, you know, the Marie Kondo

thing, chuck it out, if it doesn't give you any emotional response. Every Jersey gives me an emotional response [Jan laughs] because I've bought it for a reason. But it's also not getting worn...

Jan: ...yeah...

Idlan: ...and nobody's wearing it, and it's creating waste. And if I get, if I, if I throw it away, it gets into, um, it goes into a landfill.

So this is kinda like the intersection between semi fast fashion and waste and football as well.

Paul: I found that working from home since COVID has saved, well, not saved, actually given me a, a larger rationale for wearing all of my football tops. I have many, many, many.

Uh, my usual souvenir when I go on holiday is a football top from our local club...

Jan: ...ah, yeah...

Paul: ...we were in Denmark this year. I have, uh, the away kit of FC Odense in Denmark.

Jan: Yep.

Paul: Not many people have that there. [Jan laughs]

My son has the full kit and he wears it to football training. Um, last year we were in Cologne. I have an FC Cologne, and they have a big tie-in with Barrow, actually, really bizarrely...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...there's a group of fans who interconnect between them. But I do know fully what you mean because it's so easy to build them up and it's so hard to throw them away.

Football fans don't buy football jerseys like you buy any other t-shirt, just as something they need to wear. They buy it because it's got that connection. Whether it be a passing connection like mine was to Odense and, um, Cologne or whether it be that longer term connection.

I have Barrow AFC shirts, and I'll come back to your point here as well about the quality of shirts. Since Barrow went back into the football league, the

quality of shirts has increased massively, because the bigger companies who make the better-quality shirts are more interested in you when you are in a football league that's on a national level and seen, then when you're, uh.

I mean, I've watched by a level that used to be called the Unibond Premier, the Northern Premier League. Playing against teams for, you talk about Durham. I saw them play, um, Esh Winning FC near Durham in the FA Cup qualifying.

They, they actually played at Durham's ground because Esh Winning's was, uh, unsuitable and there were places and people, you see. But yeah, the, the shirts are just really low quality. You feel like they fall apart. It's, it's fascinating...

Jan: ...so where, where are all these shirts manufactured and are there any sustainability issues that come from the manufacturing of kit?

Idlan: If you pick up a football shirt that is manufactured by, let's say, the big three, and the big three I mean here, Adidas, Puma, and, um, Nike. Chances are they are made in Southeast Asia, or Turkey.

So there's a, there's a carbon footprint of just manufacturing this, let's not go into the process of making them, and the process of, you know, water usage in making the shirts. The process of using chemicals, the colours and everything that's, um, that's being handled in a country that might not have as high standards of legal regulation about, you know, wastage from, from factories. So there's a potential kind of pollution story there as well.

Not very many manufacturers make things, you know, locally anymore. As in locally, as in like if you are, if you are in Europe, then you are keeping the manufacturing to Europe. I mean, that's the 1980s kind of globalisation story that unfortunately, um, because of cost and money, going back to um, why all everything's being driven by money, um, it's never gone away. 'Cause it is cheaper.

And just to add to that, the cost of making a shirt is marginal and the profit that they make on this is *astronomical*.

Jan: Mm-hmm.

Idlan: So they now, in most big clubs have, for example, um, a player's issue jersey that they sell for 120 quid, and then they have a cheaper version, you know, the fan version. But the fan version is about 85 quid.

So it's not all that cheap, and this is not before you put the numbers and everything on. So, so, I actually don't know how much they cost individually. I don't think they're gonna cost more than a fiver to make.

So you can think about the profit margins of three shirts a season, times every season...

Jan: ...yeah...

Idlan: ...and the amount that, that is just being sold globally everywhere.

Jan: And it just sort of, um, and we've delved into it many times before on the podcast, is the wee modern slavery worker, worker issue tucked in that, that bit as well.

Paul: And the way they make you seem special is a lot of these shirts now come with little patches on, that have got a number on it. And it's a number that is not on any other of the shirts. So it's showing you it's an individually made special one, yours is number 4,227 XB2C, and no one else will have that number on it.

I can't say there's a single football fan I've ever met who would say, you wouldn't believe what number or, I've got on here. [Jan laughs] They don't care. But it's just a way for them to say, but it's authentic, so you know, you really need an authentic one, that's why we can afford to charge you.

When I grew up, 30 to 40 pounds, and that's in the course of 30 years, more than doubled, like you say...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...even for a child, you can, a child's football top now is more than 40 pounds.

You mentioned modern slavery, and that in the context of the manufacture of shirts. There's also labour issues, of course. Going back to the Qatar World Cup there were so many migrant workers brought into Qatar to help build the stadium, so many issues that were brought up about their welfare. Officially, there were 40 deaths during the construction of the Qatar stadiums.

Although again, that's the official figure, and as I said before, there's independent watchdogs who do it, and they're saying it could be in the thousands of deaths of migrant workers who've come in to build these stadiums.

So there's issues of labour, modern slavery? Not, not necessarily. I don't know if you could call it as modern slavery, but it's maybe forced labour or poor labour, certainly...

Jan: ...poor labour, yeah...

Paul: ...not, not good labour conditions. That's across the board.

You think of football as rich players, you know, making sometimes up to say a million pounds a week, which is a ridiculous amount. If I earned a million pounds in a week, I'd retire after a week...

Jan: [laughing] ...we wouldn't see you here...

Paul: ...that, that's it. You know, I, I'd only need to work for another couple of weeks, and I'd be happy for the rest of my life.

It's a, a game where you've got the extremes, isn't it, Idlan? Where you've got people who are earning millions at the very top, but then you've got those who are doing a lot of the hard work to enable that to be possible, who are suffering at the bottom.

Idlan: Yeah, that, that reminds me quite a bit of a conversation that I had with a couple of people who worked at a Premiership football club, I won't say which, who are doing quite well. And they would have, uh, produced over the years a number of players that have gone on to become superstars.

Now, where I'm going with this is that you, you will know the first team coach. And he's gonna be paid like, you know, millions. But then beneath him you've got the academy coaches. And then the age group coaches, who have basically shaped all these players all the way up to becoming the superstars that they are.

But the, these people that I know and I've met on coaching courses work two or three jobs because their pay for coaching, let's say at the under-14 level at a Premiership Academy, isn't enough to, to sustain them for a month because they get um, it's what, what you would call sometimes zero-hour contracts in some scenarios, or they just get paid when the season is on and when the, in the off season they don't. So they're holding two or three jobs. And this is not very far down from the pyramid of coaches that actually are getting the million.

So the disparity in the pay of the people who actually are making things happen for your billion-pound players, million-pound players is also something that's quite concerning.

Jan: Well, I think we need to do something about it. Uh... [laughs]

Paul: ...good luck, Jan.

If there's anything that's been shown about global governance of football, it's very hard for anyone outside the top table to have any influence at all on what's happening.

Jan: Yeah. But there must be cracks and crevices where we can, we can dig in and find some, some opportunities.

So, so, what kind of good things have you seen? Things that would, might be, you know, not put us off football for life. Because I'm, I'm also thinking, I, I'm sure that if we had a, a rugby union expert on here, we would hear many of the same stories. I don't think it's unique to...

Paul: ...I do need to point out to you here that whilst I've got lots of negative things to say about football, I love the game [Jan laughs] and I love watching it, and I support my team and always will support my team...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...that's not an issue at all. It's just, yeah, there are just, I, I'm wise enough to know where there are issues and not to view it through rose-tinted spectacles thinking everything's amazing.

Jan: Yeah. So, what can we do? What are some of the things that you've observed within the field that are creating better possibilities?

Idan: On the one hand, I see clubs doing things. Not massively, not all the time, but they are trying to do things. So it seems piecemeal, it seems incremental, but sometimes you have to start somewhere.

There's something like Arsenal or, or Chelsea, for example, having, um, solar power panels to power the training centres, that's a step in the right direction. Um, it is much better than just planting a tree and clapping your hands on one weekend in February and saying, 'on Green Week, we've just planted a tree'. So it's a couple of steps beyond that...

Jan: ..yeah...

Idlan: ...which is, which is nice.

I have also seen players trying to show a bit more awareness in what they do. They have, football players have massive influence, and the capacity of what they can do is, is amazing.

I'm a little bit sceptical about, you know, um, these supernational bodies because most of the time when they say things, the sceptic in me goes, yeah, that's greenwashing.

But on the grassroots level, and this is where I think most of the hope is, um, there are organisations that are trying to instil a lot of, not just awareness, but behavioural changes in fans that incrementally could add up to actual change.

So for example, there's an organisation called Pledgeball, which is one of my favourite organisations. What they do is they get fans of different clubs to pledge a carbon footprint saving kind of an action that they will take and they affiliate it to their club.

So for example, I'm gonna take a train instead of drive to the next game. I'm going to eat one vegan meal a week, something like that. And what Pledgeball do is they run a league and look at, you know, which fans have actually pledged the most. And so that actually cultivates action on the ground, on the grass, at the grassroots level.

Interestingly, um, top of that Pledgeball league, believe it or not, it's probably the only time they're ever gonna be that high up in a league, is Millwall. They've actually had the most pledges.

Jan: Well, given that I don't follow the beautiful game, I know everyone hates Millwall, and Millwall like being hated. Have I got that more or less right?

Paul: I, I don't know that everyone hates Millwall. I have a soft spot for Millwall, and a lot of us probably do, because Millwall are just the opposite of a fashionable club, is what I would say...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...it's not so much that everyone hates them, but they're the London club that's never going to be taken over by a billionaire oligarch, or some kind of oil consortium. Um, they are a club that love their history, and being part of it.

And you'll go past their ground on the railway line, it's right next to it when you go out of London, I think it's when you're heading out of Tower Bridge Station

or, no, yeah, Tower Bridge, not Victoria. And you can start see into it and it's the New Den, but the New Den's not that new anymore.

But they love it and they, they're just a club that are really passionate about it...

Jan: ...well, I...

Paul: ...but they used to have big reputation for hooliganism...

Jan: ...ah, right. Right, well, I...

Paul: ...that's what it was...

Jan: ...like them, I'm, I'm pleased to have it revised.

Paul: Yeah.

Jan: 'Cause people who love their clubs sounds, that sounds like a really sort of wholesome, pretty cool thing as long as you don't fight about it.

Paul: And they're also at the time of recording, not that far off being in a place where they might get promoted to the Premier League, and that would be one of the most hilarious things that ever happened to the Premier League. [Jan laughs] Almost on a par with Luton Town getting promoted to the Premier League. It's, yeah.

Idlan: I would love to see Millwall get promoted ahead of Wrexham, for example. That would just make my year.

Yeah, so, so, um, there are a lot of grassroots organisations that do these, these kind of things. Um, another one that I can think of in, in Birmingham at the moment is a initiative that, um, somebody at the Birmingham FA started called Save Today Play Tomorrow.

And it started with just trying to make players at grassroots game at the weekends pick up their rubbish and throw it away in the rubbish bin that's just over there. And it's grown to having campaigns for more solar panelling at clubhouses within the region, engaging with different clubs on how to improve their carbon footprint, et cetera, et cetera.

So, um, this is something that's grown, you know, from, from the bottom. And sometimes I think when things are at the grassroots level, given the reach and the mass and the fact that they, they, um, involve people like you and me. It

has the opportunity, if it gets to a large enough scale, to actually make real impact.

One person saying it of, or football player saying it might, you know, might make some impact, some ripples. But I think the waves come when normal people actually realise that actually this is part of what I can do. And if you've got to link it to a football club to make it happen, then so be it. I'd rather see that happen than not.

Jan: That reminds me of the, the podcast we had about the Persuadables. So people who are able to be brought forward into a different way of thinking and acting...

Paul: ...ah, so you don't mean like the Northwest counties division three team, the Persuadables United?

Jan: [laughs] I think you're having me on. Yeah, both of you are giggling. I'm being, I'm being trolled in my own podcast. How dare you?

Paul: I could say a football team was called anything and you would be forced to believe me.

Jan: Well I used to think there was one called Partick Thistle Nil, but apparently not.

[Everyone laughs]

Paul: No, that, that is that not East Fife four, Forfar five?

Jan: [laughs] Anyway, back on, back on track...

Paul: ...I've got millions of football lines...

Jan: ...I'm sure you have...

Paul: ...I'm just using them all in this episode 'cause I know this isn't coming again.

Jan: [laughing] Yes, indeed. So can we maybe talk briefly about the players before we sort of draw us to a close?

Paul: Before we do, I want to talk about a particular club.

Jan: Okay.

Paul: Because we talked about Millwall, but I want to talk about Forest Green Rovers because they are a team that has a huge reputation when it comes to sustainability, when it comes to players being vegan. If you work for Forest Green Rovers at whatever level, you've got to be a vegan.

I dunno how they control that, what you're doing in your living room at home, but certainly when you are working for them. Totally vegan. They don't have plastic packaging. They are powered 100%, or so they say, I mean, I've not analysed their data, by green renewable energy.

They're also ridiculed relentlessly [Jan laughs] by supporters of any other club that happens to be in their division for just about each and every one of these things.

Um, you go as a football fan, as a visiting fan to Forest Green, you will ridicule them for the food offerings that they've got there. You know, take the mickey out of them for all their messaging about this, that and the other, because that's just the traditional thing that football fans will do.

But what Forest Green have done under Dale Vince as their chairman, is frankly amazing how they've been able to do it. I was a bit dubious about the claims they made, about the construction of their stadium and the carbon neutrality of it all, and everything. But the materials they've used, there's certainly a lot more consideration gone into it than most clubs.

Jan: And when you say Dale, Vince, um, that's the name I know from, you know, sustainability and business because of his renewable energy...

Paul: ...Yes...

Jan: ...um, firm...

Paul: ...yeah, yeah. He, if you've ever looked for the place Forest Green on a map, you'll be looking for a long time. He has made this a club, in an area where there's actually not really much around anywhere in the west country, but he's turned it into a club that's a beacon, hasn't he, for sustainability.

Idan: Yeah. What fascinates me about what he's, he's managed to do is that he's proven that actually these two things, sustainability and football, can go hand in hand. And he's got a business model that works.

Now, I'm not gonna talk about profit, because very few football clubs really make a profit, but he can run a club with these principles and it fascinates me

that nobody else actually copied him, off of it. It's not a, not, what I would love to see is that Forest Green Rovers not being a novelty. That it becomes, okay, maybe not the vegan pies thing, all the time for everyone, but things like that.

The things that they do, like they use rainwater in the toilets. That's an easy win for, you know, half the clubs in the country. We're not a very dry country in England. [Paul chuckles]

Um, but, but you know, instead of being ridiculed for this, why don't other clubs kind of, you know, take action and actually be proud of it? I know that he's a bit of a character. So that's probably part of it, and banter is really kind of like the fun bit about, about, um, about football.

You, you don't really, you know, um, have a proper day out until, unless there's a little bit of banter. But there's some stuff that he's, he's done there that I would love to see replicated. And I'm not, not at least in the, in the, in England. I do know that, um, Real Betis, which is, um, a club in Spain...

Paul: ...Oh, I was really hoping you'd let Jan guess...

Jan: ...Real, I would've known. I would've known...

[laughter]

Paul: ...yeah, sorry, it's a club in Spain, yeah...

Idlan: ...Real Betis is another club that's, you know, um, trying to have a whole, I mean, they're, they're interesting for a number of different reasons, but they're, they've got like a manifesto of, of going green that they've put into place.

The fact that these are far and few in between and are still a novelty is what grates at me. Because it shouldn't be a novelty. It should be something that you just kind of do.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah. I don't even like to say I know every single opposition football fan will take the mickey out of them. That's just 'cause that's what they've got to take the mickey out of them for.

Um, the things that are said about Barrow as a place, um, not repeatable on this. [Jan laughs] The fact that we have something called the slag bank about half a hour away from, uh, the ground doesn't help matters. Uh, and there's

lot, lots of other things as well, but there's always something that fans will pick on. But yeah, that shouldn't stop other clubs taking it up because yeah, there's, he's shown what can be done.

Not everything is gonna be doable by every club, but he's shown the vast range of things that you can do. It just doesn't have to be one particular aspect of it.

Jan: Yeah. So I'm really interested in, in the, the role of individuals and particularly football stars who are, you know, absolutely, you know, admired, looked up to all of those sorts of things.

What kind of things can the players themselves do in this area and what really good practice have you seen in terms of, you know, football players, maybe not all stars, but maybe, you know, all sorts of football players actually leading the way?

Idan: So, I mean, the reach of football stars, I mean, the person in the... a football star is the person that's got the most Instagram followers in the world. So the ability for them to become, you know, key actors, changes, change makers is, is massive.

Unfortunately, I have not seen as much as I would like or I would've, you know, expected on this. There are some exceptions. There are some players like Juan Mata who, who used to play for Chelsea, Man United and Spain. He's gone and created an organisation that does like lots of little, um, humanitarian acts and, and called, called Common Goal. Um, that kind of reach that he's got, he's managed to get other people, um, buying into that.

I would love to see that in the, in the, um, environmental space. There are people that, if you follow them closely enough, you will see that they are, they'll do some promos when it comes to Green Pledge Week, whatever it is that Sky does.

But I have not seen stars on the level of, let's say your Cristiano Ronaldos, and your Leo Messis or your Yamals or your Bellinghams to actually actively promote that, you know, um, promote recycling or, or, or buying a green car.

They'll do it if it's a commercial that they've been contracted to do, but as a way of life, because, because if you, you what, what you really want to create are sustainable actions over the life of a fan, right?

If, if, um, even if it, I mean, my nephew is a massive Cristiano Ronaldo fan, and he stopped drinking Coke because Cristiano Ronaldo took a Coke bottle and

threw it away at a press coffee and said, this is rubbish, I'm drinking water. You know that that's the kind of reach...

Jan: ...yeah...

Idlan: ...to young kids that these football stars, sports stars could do, and it's global. So I would like to see a lot more of these green ambassadors kind of like showcase it. There are pockets, there are players that do this here and there and then, you know, but they don't often mark it up as a sustainable piece of fashion.

And I think there's a counter to that because you want it to be part of just your daily life. But the reach that they've got, I would love to see more just active campaigning. Having said that, I know, uh, currently there is a campaign that's been done by some more players about, um, the 2031 World Cup, I think? And the, or the sponsorship of Aramco at a World Cup because of the kind of environmental damage that they're doing it.

This is not gonna be picked up by mainstream media, it is through social media. It's quieter, and the potential. If you could use, um, football players to sell, you know, shoelaces, you could get kids to throw things in the right bins. Um, there's a lot of potential there...

Jan: ...yeah...

Idlan: ...a lot of space.

Jan: So to bring this all together 'cause I, I think we've only touched the, the very top of the iceberg. I think we might have to have more, more episodes.

Paul: More football.

Jan: Yeah, yeah.

Paul: We're gonna turn into a football podcast, 'cause I hate to tell you there's a lot of them about. [Jan laughs]

Jan: What's, what's next for you Idlan in this area?

Idlan: My, my, my research now has started focusing on actual responsible business actions. I'm really interested in actual actions that are being taken versus CSR stuff, you know, that's done for, for the cameras, and I really want to look at a lot more, in how the football sector is, is doing this.

Um, so that's where I think my research is going to be, um, angling towards. The Centre for Responsible Business at the University of Birmingham has now relaunched its five principles, and under one of those I've, we have, um, a cluster researching responsible businesses, sport.

So engaging with other sports obviously. But for me that's probably gonna be, um, the football bit, looking at how people or clubs or individuals are actually enacting actions over words.

I would like to have the opportunity to, to, um, also review some of these policies that they, they come out with, you know, little, little audits in actual actions. Not as a way to say, naughty, naughty, you shouldn't have done that, because we're all complicit in doing danger to the environment, you know, in one way or another. But as an internal benchmark for self-reflection. If I am a football club and I want to be a greener football club, what are the things that I need to do? I don't have to tell everybody about this, but what can I do that doesn't have to be showy, but. So I'm kind of looking at benchmarking on, on those, on those, um, aspects as well.

Paul: Well, this has been fascinating. We haven't even got onto discussions around things such as the fact they're gonna hold World Cup in Spain, Morocco, Portugal, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Argentina in nine years time.

You're looking horrified at that Jan, [Jan laughs] but that [inaudible] yes that, actually in five years time, that should be...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...and there's so many other issues. There's things such as the EFL Green Club scheme, there's a whole lot around football and sustainability...

Jan: ...well, as I say...

Paul: ...that we haven't had a chance to discuss, but what we have discussed has been brilliant.

Jan: Yeah. Well, as I say, this might be, we won't do only football, but it seems like there's more football to be done in this area.

Paul: Idlan, thank you so much for joining us.

Idlan: Thank you for having me.

[Theme music]

Paul: Did you feel left out a bit there at times, Jan, [Jan laughs] I got the feeling that myself and Idlan were away discussing various football things and you had the look on your face that I can very definitely see on my face whenever you have an accountant guest.

Jan: [laughs] Kind of, but it was, it was a joy and I, I knew that you two would have so many things in common and, and have insights into this area.

So it was an absolute joy to get to introduce you two.

Paul: Yeah, because, as I say, I am a big football fan, but I'm also aware of the shortcomings of the game when it comes to sustainability. It doesn't stop me being a football fan, but you can see it in so many ways.

You know, a World Cup in Qatar that had to be held in winter because there was no way you could play in summer in Qatar without the players essentially dying on the pitch in 50-degree heat, and the fact they had to build a whole infrastructure there.

Though the World Cup before that was in Russia. There's issues there obviously about Russia and politics and the whole sustainability, uh, element where it comes to wars and conflict.

And then on the club level, the fact that it is a one-off, Forest Green Rovers, rather than the trend setter, and rather than other people doing exactly what they're doing.

And instead you've got sovereign wealth funds from various Emirates and states in the Middle East where oil is where all the money comes from.

Jan: And I don't suppose that the issues are unique to, to football. I'm sure they're elsewhere, but I guess it's really, you know, football's such a big sport...

Paul: ...mm-hmm....

Jan: ...uh, globally, but also in, in the UK, and so coming together around that sport I think is a really interesting way of thinking about sustainability through, through a different practice, through a cultural practice.

Paul: I dare say we probably haven't actually discussed a bigger, industry business than football on this podcast...

Jan: ...that's true...

Paul: ...because it's almost every country in the world you, you would say there is football there. There are more than 200 national teams. If you look at membership of the UN, there are fewer members of the UN. Then there are members of FIFA who play international football, 'cause you have countries like Gibraltar, Kosovo, et cetera, who play football but aren't necessarily recognised at other levels when it comes to it.

And it's a big, big industry. But it has increasingly become a money generating industry at whatever level you look at it, and it's hard to make money running a football club. As Idlan has said, you are not gonna be making a profit unless you are one of the biggest football clubs in the world.

But there's publicity and stature that come with it. And, sustainability's kind of a...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...it's not, it's not even an afterthought. It's beyond an afterthought.

Jan: Yeah. Well, it's a, it's a huge thing. I only noticed that I was described as a Taylor Swift of the academic accounting world. I mean, that's what stuck in my memory of that. The rest of it was like football, blah, blah, blah, football, football, football.

Paul: I, I blanked that out amazingly. [Jan laughs] Yeah. Totally forgotten it. Yes...

Jan: ...but it was...

Paul: ...what we didn't say at the start was that Idlan was delusional when she first met you. [sarcastic voice] Taylor Swift.

Jan: [laughing] No, Idlan's been a good friend of the Pentland Centre, I mean a good friend personally, but has also been a really good connector for the Pentland Centre, particularly across to Malaysia as well, where her contacts are superb.

Paul: And we've covered football here. Like you say, there's other sports where it's gonna apply. You hear about individuals in certain other sports just refusing to travel to certain countries because of the carbon impact. You see it more in individual sports, say like athletics, where people won't travel from the UK to say somewhere like Australia to represent their country because they're aware of the big carbon impact of them going to Australia.

And you, you see that, but you don't necessarily see that much of it in individuals in football, as we've said. And apart from Forest Green Rovers, I can't think of another club, obviously we've had Real Betis who are in, do you want to guess the name of the league that they play in Spain?

Jan: Uh, Le League. [laughs]

Paul: You are so close. It's La Liga.

Jan: hoo-hoo!

Paul: If only you had not gone more French with your second word and gone with, yeah, if it starts with that, it's not gonna end in 'ee', it's going to end in 'ah'. Yeah, La Liga.

Um, there's not many other clubs you hear about in any sport that are pushing this agenda. They, they're probably there, but their publicity is not such that they get talked about all the time.

Jan: Well, uh, in the show notes, um, dear listeners, we'll put some things about, uh, Forest Green Rovers and some of the other elements that we've spoken about as well, so that's very cool.

Paul: Yeah, it's been a really good conversation. We're gonna be talking about something I have a little less knowledge about next time, but, you know, I'll do my best, I'll do my best.

We're gonna be talking about family businesses. Um, succession, the role of the next generation when it comes to family businesses, and how that all affects attitudes towards sustainability.

Jan: That sounds fab.

Paul: Yes. We've got, uh, Professor Alfredo de Massis, who's from here at Lancaster, as well as about 50 other institutions. He's so well renowned. He's got positions in Switzerland and in Italy as well.

And he's one of the leading figures when it comes to family business research in the world. So that'll be a great guest for us. Until then, thank you very much for listening, and it's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: And it's goodbye from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]

