

The Poppy in Football: Why Players Should Wear Them

“The poppy commemorates the people of war, not the politics behind them.”

By [Patrick Hook-Willers](#)

Sunday 11 November 2018



Image: Nadine Doerle

The arrival of Remembrance Weekend once again has sparked the debate surrounding footballers and other sportspeople wearing, or rather refusing to wear, the symbol of remembrance in the United Kingdom, a red poppy. The most notable culprit of this is as ever, Stoke City winger James McClean, but has been joined in refusal by Manchester United midfielder Nemanja Matic. In the year where we centenary of the Armistice, the signing of the peace treaty which ended the First World War, the issue takes on a new level of significance. Although many will argue that these sportspeople should have the freedom to choose, which I agree they should, the matter of principle comes into it when you take the time to remember just who it was that was fighting in that dreadful conflict. Sportsmen were not exempt, thousands fought and hundreds died, so why is it fair that the overprivileged, highly paid footballers of today feel it is acceptable to ignore their colleagues' sacrifices.

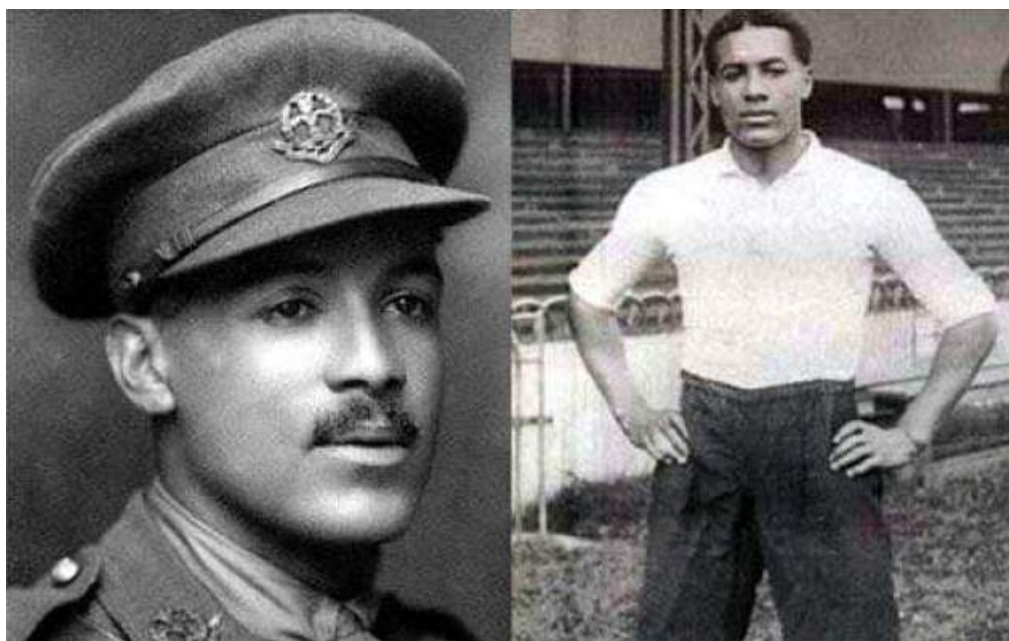
Although I fully understand McClean's motives for refusing to wear the poppy, I believe that in this centenary year, political affiliations and grievances should be put aside in the public arena of sport, as testament to those who aged the very same sport that grants him such a privileged way of life.

“

A man who was forced into a fight that wasn't his, but one he dutifully accepted.

”

The first man I feel it is essential to highlight is Walter Tull, a professional footballer for Tottenham Hotspur and Northampton Town prior to the outbreak of the First World War. Walter's life and career were blighted by racist abuse, particularly during his spell at Tottenham. Upon the outbreak of war, Tull signed up to fight and was posted to both the 17th and 23rd Battalions Middlesex Regiments, where he became the very first black officer in command of white troops in the British Army. He fought for almost the entire duration of the war, until he was killed in Pas-de-Calais just eight short months before the Armistice in March of 1918. A man who had success on the football pitch, forced into a fight that wasn't his, but one he dutifully accepted and sacrificed himself for. Walter Tull is a man that deserves remembrance, so why should his memory be ignored by peers and successors because of the horrific orders of a few in Derry in 1972?



Walter Tull in uniform and Tottenham Hotspur kit. Image: Mina Kelly

Alexander 'Sandy' Turnbull played 110 games for Manchester City before crossing the city to Manchester United, for whom he played 220 games, scoring 90 goals. His time at United saw him drive the club to become the first division champions in 1908, and then FA Cup champions a year later, Manchester United's first ever FA Cup triumph, scoring in the final of that year's competition. He is quietly regarded as one of Manchester United's most important sons, but why isn't he more highly regarded among the wider fanbase? The simple answer being that his career was cut short because of war. Like Walter Tull and so many others, he paid the ultimate sacrifice in the First World War. He fought alongside Tull in the 23rd Battalion Middlesex Regiment, being killed in Arras, France in 1917. A promising and already esteemed career halted by a fight that was ultimately greater than himself. Without men like Sandy sacrificing themselves for those who could not fight, freedom may have been long since lost.



Alexander 'Sandy' Turnbull in Manchester United gear. Image: Colorsport

The point of the poppy is to remember ordinary people that made the ultimate sacrifice for the benefit of those who couldn't. In an era where people are extremely aware of standing up for what's right and defending the marginalised, one would think a symbol like the poppy would be welcomed.

In the case of McClean and other high level sportspeople in this centenary year, I believe an element of respect for sporting predecessors like Tull and Turnbull should be observed. If they are happy to reap the massive benefits of playing in Britain, then I feel it's only fair that they show the same level of respect afforded to them by those that fought for their right to enjoy the lives they do today, if only for this one extraordinary year in history. Sport is an escape – many of the players have escaped poverty, the fans escape reality, while the soldiers of the First World War escaped their horrific surroundings through it. The Christmas Truce of 1914 saw troops of both sides on The Western Front play a game of football, which the Germans won 2-1, in a fleeting moment of humanity which was again swiftly snuffed out by orders from higher authorities.

The poppy commemorates the people of wars, not the politics behind them. The poppy commemorates the sacrifices made by ordinary men and women, not the governments that sent them there. Players like McClean should put politics aside and respect those that gave everything so that the freedom to play could exist today.



Most Read Discussed

1. [Men's Football 3s fight back to win on Derby Day](#)
2. [Premier League Round-Up: Gameweek 15](#)
3. [Zidane the greatest of all time](#)
4. [Mind over Matter: An insight into the psychology of boxing](#)
5. [Women's sport to open and close Roses 2019](#)
6. [Is lad culture really a bad thing?](#)

Write for Nouse Sport

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

[Join the Facebook group](#)

More in Sport

[York 'Movember' total revealed](#)

[Premier League Round-Up: Gameweek 15](#)

[Premier League Round-Up: Gameweek 14](#)

[Men's Football 3s fight back to win on Derby Day](#)

[Premier League Round-Up: Gameweek 13](#)

[Netball 1s show Roses mettle in front of large crowd](#)

- [About Nouse](#)
- [Who's Nouse](#)
- [Website Credits](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Student Discounts](#)
- [Print Editions](#)
- [Mini-Sites](#)
- [Nouse on Twitter](#)
- [Nouse on Facebook](#)
- [Nouse on Google+](#)

