

Satellite transmitted passion? A study of Norwegians relationship to English football

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Introduction

As a social and cultural phenomenon, modern football can be studied in terms of two contradictory, but also complementary characteristics, taking players, coaches, supporters and the increasing influence of business people as key agents in the development of the game. Football has developed and gained its popularity as a sport and a cultural form from both a principle of reconciliation and a principle of antagonism. In terms of identity this entails a twofold approach, resembling Richard Giulianotti's distinction between a semantic and a syntactic principle, focussing on 'who we are' on one hand and 'who we are not' on the other (Giulianotti, 1999). The latter approach is more influenced by structuralism, especially as outlined by Claude Levi Strauss (1966). His work on binary opposites appears to be particularly relevant in the case of football-rivalries, while the lack of a diachronic and an empirical perspective makes it rather insufficient when it comes to understanding the historical processes which generated specific social and cultural identities. A study of how Norwegians have linked up with English football and how this relationship is maintained over time, necessarily has to focus on how transnational cultural impulses have influenced the Norwegian game and its significance as a generator of social and cultural identities in Norway. The British brought football to the modern world. Unlike the situation in a lot of the traditional football powers in the world, Norwegian football has been influenced by British influences in ways which have been characterised more by admiration than antagonism. Yet, this fact has not led to simple adoptions of British football cultural practices. From a combined historical and anthropological perspective, I will in this paper give a brief analysis of the British as mostly a beloved Other in Norwegian football during the 20th century.

A lot of academic approaches to the understanding of football cultural practices tend to focus on relations and rivalries tied to the sense of honour within club communities, forming a part of people's concrete local or national sociocultural universes (c.f. Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1997, 1999). Within the context of support, Norwegians' relationships to English football teams bring in a disparity in that respect. A person supporting a team which is located in his town can relate the club to his own autobiographical universe as an authentically experienced reality. A Norwegian supporter of an English team is necessarily a "long distance supporter". The early introduction of live English matches via the Norwegian public broadcasting channel generated a kind of supporter which might be labelled an early post modern fan, due to his reliance on media coverage for maintaining this relationship. A lot of Norwegians support one team in England and a local team in Norway in a way which not necessarily favours the local team. A recent dawn of new and more partisan supporter styles in Norway has altered this pattern, producing a greater pride in the support for local teams. Yet, the parallel support for one English and one Norwegian team is still predominant. How does this effect the "tribal" aspects of the game (Mangan, 1996), i.e. the structuring of rivalries and enemies so often associated with football, and to what extent can we relate the development of ways of playing and ways of support in Norway to a kind of hybridisation (Archetti, 1999)? While the focus here will be on more recent events and tendencies, some historical origins require closer scrutiny in order to understand the current British cultural hegemony within Norwegian football

cultural practices.

Historical accounts: British teams, coaches and the role of the media

As in a lot of other regions and nations the sport was a foreigner in Norway when the game arrived for the first time, probably in the 1880s. After an initial period of some 20 to 30 years, when football was played mostly by middle class students and merchants' sons, the sport had its social breakthrough during and shortly after World War 1. Since the 1930s football has been the largest sport in the Norwegian Sports Federation, leading to descriptions like "folk-sport" or "our national summer sport" (J. Juve, 1934). Currently football is the largest organised participant sport for both males and females in Norway. Yet, football has never been able to threaten the cultural position of skiing as Norway's national sport and carrier of national virtues. Skiing is what makes Norway different. Norwegians have never been in a position to label football "our game" in the same way as British or Latin peoples. It is almost unthinkable that the death of any Norwegian footballer would produce the same sort of coverage in the Norwegian media as the death of Sir Stanley Matthews did on the front pages of nearly every broadsheet and tabloid paper here in England in March 2000. The popularity of the game in Norway developed despite a general lack of international success and a lack of touch with the hegemonic and nationbuilding images generated from skiing and winter sports.

Football was brought to Norway in different ways, either via sailors working on British naval and merchant ships, Brits travelling to Norway for work or from Norwegians returning home after a visit of business or studies, enthused by this new ball game. British coaches were operating in Norway from the turn of the century, mainly on an amateur basis, as a hobby next to their professional job. But some Scottish and English people came to Norway primarily as professional coaches and English coaches were hired to prepare the Olympic teams both in 1912 and 1920 (Goksøyr, Larsen and Peterson, 1997). As was the case in many European and Latin American nations, British professional clubs played games in Norway early in the 20th century. The three first professional clubs to cross the North Sea were Scottish; Glasgow Rangers in 1911, followed by Hearts and Celtic the following year. Hull City were the first professional English club to play in Norway, in 1912, while Crystal Palace followed in 1914. Big clubs such as Newcastle and Arsenal played games in Oslo in 1922 and 23, respectively.

Apart from a brief period between 1936 and 38, male Norwegian football has brought home no international honours. The latest relative successes of the national side has by some commentators often been interpreted almost as an exaggeration of the British style with its long ball tactics and omission of midfielders. . . . Nevertheless the current national team have created a tradition, a paradigmatic basis built on a rational and a highly analytical approach, with only two focuses: to locate via research the most effective ways of scoring goals and preventing the opposition from scoring. Egil Olsen, the coach of the national team during the innovative years 1990-98, submitted a thesis at the Norwegian University for Sport and P. E. as early as 1973 called *Scoringer i fotball* - "Goals in football" (Olsen, 1973). A successful penetrative style of play based on counter attacking was established as the Norwegian way in the early 1990s, resulting in the qualification to the World Cup Finals in 1994 and 98 and also in the European Championships 2000. Interestingly, Egil Olsen, became the manager of Wimbledon F. C. in England in the summer of 1999. Wimbledon and the 1990s Norwegian national team have in English and Norwegian media often been compared as protagonists for the same style of direct and physical football. In the wake of the progress of

Norwegian football, a gradual professionalisation of the Norwegian Premier League has evolved, all while a significant export of Norwegian players to England in particular has brought new dimensions into the footballing relationship between Norway and Britain.¹ It has created a situation distinctly different from the one that has dominated all the previous decades. The mentality following in the wake of this process could be interpreted as a growing belief in original, self-made ways, and a reluctance towards simply copying the bigger nations at a lower level. Tradition is definitely in the making within the contemporary footballing scene in Norway. However, this new era has not diminished the interest and passion for English football in Norway.

The growing interest in English football in Norway was mainly generated by the printed press until the 1960s. After World War 1 Norwegian newspapers and sportsjournals occasionally reported on British football. By the 1920s the daily press had started a more or less thorough coverage of British, mainly English, football. Cigarette cards of English footballers made cigarette packets popular among Norwegian kids in the late 1930s. In 1946 the Norwegian parliament voted to introduce stately run football pools. The first coupon with betting objects in 1948 consisted purely of English matches. Football pools became immensely popular in Norway thereby creating even closer relations between English clubs and Norwegian lovers of English football who gradually adopted specific teams as “their” teams, parallell to their hoping that Wolves would win and make them rich. English matches have since the start generated greater turnovers than Norwegian games. In 1969 the ties between English and Norwegian football were strengthened even more when the Norwegian stately run broadcasting corporation (NRK) introduced regular live coverage of English matches during the long winter break in Norway.² “Tippekampen”, which is the vernacular term for the Saturday afternoon match, should be seen both as an outcome of existing and latent interest, and as a cause for the coming hype of English football in Norway. After the Second World War almost every Norwegian newspaper, even the very local ones, printed English league tables and results also from second, third and fourth division on the Monday morning.

A case of satellite transmitted passion?

The popular status of English football in Norway was firmly established with the introduction of live TV coverage of the traditional English Saturday games. ”Tippekampen” gave rise to a previously unparalleled nationwide movement of what we could call a ”satellite transmitted passion”. English football now became accessible to people even in the most remote rural parts of Norway. During the 1970’s English football became a cult, particularly among youngsters. While the successful sides generated the largest support, it is interesting to note that substantial support was generated for a diversity of clubs. Clubs like Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester United, Arsenal and Tottenham attracted the largest support, but into the 1970s people developed various degrees of support and interest in a large diversity of teams. Substantial newspaper coverage of English football, the distribution of English football magazines³ and radio listening, primarily for the most dedicated fans in the Western parts of Norway with a good reception of BBC Radio, contributed to the creation of a semiotic

¹ The English Premier league and the nationwide 1st division currently holds the largest contingency of Norwegian footballers with 28 (pr. November 1999). Yet there are Norwegian professionals also playing in numerous leagues outside Scandinavia at the moment: Scotland, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Greece and Austria.

² The first Saturday-game to be televised live was a league match between Sunderland and Wolverhampton.

³ Notably *Shoot!* and *Goal*.

system in which the support of English teams started to play a key role, in school yards, playing fields and work places. Children and adults alike were closely associated with the teams they supported. Rather than forming a sense of community and collectivity around the support of the same club, English clubs had an almost individualising effect within a close circle of friends. Even if people supported a big club such as Liverpool, you would still be quite unique as a fan of Liverpool among your friends. In the 1970s a great variety of clubs generated substantial support. On a personal note, when I was 10 years old I had been an Arsenal-supporter for 3 years. I had good friends or family relatives supporting Derby, Queens Park Rangers, Aston Villa, Leeds, Wolves, Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Luton and Ipswich. From the late 70s onwards travelling to watch English games also became a popular pursuit for Norwegian fans of English teams. During the 1990's this trend developed into a more consumer oriented marketing of football holidays to England from specialised travel agencies.

During the last two decades numerous Norwegian or Scandinavian supporters clubs for English teams have been established. Manchester City were the first (1974), while supporters clubs for bigger teams such as Manchester United, Liverpool, Leeds and Arsenal were all formed between 1977 and 1982. In 1985 *Supporterunionen for britisk fotball* (SBF) was founded. This is a special union for supporters of British teams established to provide different services for supporters as well as organising meetings and social events, such as an annual football tournament in Oslo, including the various supporter clubs lining up in their beloved teams' strips. In last year's final Nottingham Forest beat Exeter City 1-0! Between 1989 and 1999 *Supporterunionen for britisk fotball* doubled their membership ten times to 75.000.⁴ This number is divided between registered supporters clubs for 45 different English teams. While supporters clubs for successful and/or glamorous corporations such as Manchester United and Liverpool attract the bulk of these members, several smaller teams also have a considerable amount of members. Apart from this there are several other supporter clubs for teams which are not members of SBF. In recent years several supporters clubs for lower division teams which have never appeared on Norwegian television have been established. This supports the assumption that TV coverage is not the sole cause for the popularity of English football in Norway. The general commodification of football in the 90s has also contributed to the decreasing significance of the live television coverage of the Saturday games. From the 98/99-season the access to watch these games was restricted exclusively to a pay-channel, which in effect meant the end of an era. However, the National Broadcasting Company reintroduced "Tippekampen", the live Saturday afternoon-match, in November last year, showing live English 1st division games rather than Premier League-matches which currently appears far too expensive for a non-commercial, public service channel. Yet, they did a major marketing before the reintroduction of "Tippekampen", clearly attempting to reinvent a tradition via nostalgic references to the the hype surrounding English football in Norway in the 1970s (traspaprent missing!). However, a new and dominant trend evolving in Norway, as in a lot of countries, is for fans to gather in specialised pubs to watch games televised by the new giant in TV coverage of English football, Sky Sports. In Oslo alone there are dozens of pubs specialising in showing English football. A curious trend here in England is for English fans unable or unwilling to obtain a match ticket to gather in certain pubs which (illegally) shows Saturday games live on the Norwegian channel.

It has often been argued that success is necessary to have a tradition in football (c.f. Archetti, 1999), a tradition which players, spectators, coaches and reporters may apply as a paradigm for future

⁴ Statistics taken from the 1997/98 annual Year Book of *Supporterunionen for Britisk Fotball*.

sporting achievements. Moving back to the 1970s, the domestic football in Norway was among the weakest in Europe in terms of success. With the increasing access to international football in general at the time, there were no Norwegian teams which could compete with foreign clubs and national sides in terms of creating a paradigmatic basis of how the game should be played. The winning of the World Cup in 1966, and the domination of English teams in the European cups in the late 1960s and into the 70s, enhanced the image of English football as an ideal standard. Despite the recent relative successes of both club and national teams, the support and love for English football prevail. When it comes to national teams a few opportunists would support West Germany, but they were few and far between.

Friends and foes

In a climate of competition and rivalry, identity in football is generally carved out in relation and in contrast to a series of others. For the traditional partisan fan it is often unthinkable to support more than one club or one nation. It might be argued that this "tribalistic" aspect of football still applies as a dominant feature in most countries where football has played and plays a significant role as generator of social and cultural identities (Hognestad, 1997). However, in Norway the support for an English club often runs parallel to that of a local Norwegian club, in ways which not necessarily give privilege to the support of the local side. The Norwegian and the English teams have generally been classified as adhering to two different universes, which due to the assumed gap in sporting abilities, would never clash. However, when S. K. Brann met Liverpool in the Quarter Finals of the European Cup Winners Cup in March 1997, the two worlds collided. Several Brann-supporters appeared in the media as members of Liverpool's Norwegian Supporters Club, admitting that this caused them a great moral dilemma. For others the English team has a clear preference to local teams. A Manchester United-fan compared his affection of United and his local club, Viking, by stating that he really was more interested in Manchester Uniteds reserve team than Viking. When Viking won the league championship in 1991 a picture of a fan celebrating in a Man. United shirt was printed in the local papers the next day. In games between the national teams of Norway and England, many Norwegians continued to support England well into the 1990s. When Norway beat England 2-1 in a World Cup qualifier in Oslo in 1981, prompting the famous message to anyone English from the late radio commentator Bjorge Lillelien, this appeared as a shock in the Norwegian public. A current director of a Norwegian Premier League side remembers the game like this:

"That was one the strangest days in my life. To think that Norway should beat England was inconceivable at the time. It was something which we believed could never happen. And I...I didn't know what to think or feel. When I walked to Ullevaal Stadium that day I entered the end where the English were and...I mean what was Norway then? It was garbage, right? National team coaches saying things like 'oh shit, we got the Soviets in our group' or 'we got England in our group...well, well we better try to limit the defeats.' The national team was a joke. How could anyone support such lack of morale?"

This attitude, a combination of loathing the local teams and admiring English sides, have prevailed Norwegian discourses on football throughout the 20th century. A man aged around 50, currently working in a football pub in Oslo called Highbury, named after Arsenal's homeground, remembers how his father, a sailor, talked about Arsenal as the ultimate contrast to the standard of Norwegian football in the late 1950s as they were watching games with their local team, Frigg F. C.:

“...when the boys were in London, looking out for a football match - and this was in the 1930s – they went to Highbury, of course. Arsenal were the big team then. Therefore when we were at Bislet [a central sports stadium in Oslo], he usually complained about the standards of Norwegian football, often punctuated with the phrase “you should have watched Arsenal.” This was the sort of remarks he used to feed me with from the age of 7.”

It is within such a climate of loathing ones own local teams for their uselessness in international competitions, generating a lack of self esteem, that English football fuelled Norwegian football imaginations and established a paradigmatic standard which local or national teams could not provide. Further, as a provider of a footballing paradigm, the moralities of the English game, based on a “physical, but honest” attitude, guide the ways Norwegians perceive international football. As such, football in some of the Latin countries, and Italy in particular, appear as something of an Other in this respect. A Norwegian Manchester United-fan compared Italian and English football in the following way:

“...Italian football is a bit like chess with teams knowing each others way of playing. After about 30 moves someone suddenly does something unexpected and...eh...Black takes a peasant from White and the game is won. English football is more of a battle field: hard, but honest, you know; shake hands after the game. Very, very few English players roll about on the pitch if they are not injured eh... which I believe a lot of Italian players do.”

The general lack of belonging to the local sociocultural universes of the English sides Norwegians support, does indicate an element of alienation. Simultaneously, the attraction of English football provides a possible creative space for hybridisation based on parallell identities rather than conflict and rivalry as is often the case in football. In recent times, a lot of anglophile Norwegian football fans have developed football geographies during their tours around England, visiting small and big footballing towns and constructing social networks around the support of several teams. Hence the social and cultural aspect, rather than the performances on the football pitch, stand out as the most significant element in the total football experiences for quite a few of these supporters. This season (1999/2000) I followed some fans of Brann Bergen who travelled to England for an extended weekend which included visiting friends in Evesham, Rotherham and Middlesbrough and watching games in Chesterfield and Middlesbrough! Two brothers support Arsenal and Middlesbrough as their English teams, but always wear the top of their beloved Norwegian club when on a footballing mission to England. Semiotically this might be read as putting their local team first while generating puzzlement and curiosity among local English fans, begging the question: ‘who are you?’, thus generating easy options for a further expansion of an already extensive Norse-English community-based network. This concrete exploration into the depths of English football is a recent thing, plunging the issue of support back from a post modern/post fan issue into a reality which includes socialising and drinking with their local English counterparts. This approach also explains their contempt for national sides, which they claim, is just an orgy in kitsch performed by “clubless people” at high profiled events and tournaments, as one of them explained:

“I take some interest in the national team, but the real football, the week in week out-stuff is to be found on a club level. I would never buy a ticket to follow the national team. If you ask me to divide my loyalties I’d probably say that the support for Brann takes up 50%, Middlesbrough 49% while

1% is left to watch the odd game with the national side on TV or reading all about it in the papers.” (Bjarte, 38)

In view of this attitude it is football as a door opener for new friendships and a widening access to the world of community based football geographies which stand out as the most important.

The late Scottish journalist and writer John Fairgrieve (1986) argued that “football thrives on rivalries” and explains the popularity of the game by pointing to the fact that teams have gained support by appealing to opposing identities. The expressions often heard on British football terraces take the shape of Bakhtin’s caption of the carnivalesque laughter: «gay and triumphant, and at the same time mocking and deriding» (Bakhtin, 1968:11-12). This «sarcastic commitment» usually evolves parallel to or in accordance with a set of unwritten rules. Chants of «part-time supporters» are often directed at fans who do not show a morally sufficient commitment (ibid). In this perspective it is the «professional» fan who is the morally correct protagonist of support, whilst the «part timer» is regarded as illoyal and lacking in morale, in ways which are comparable to Geertz’ famous depiction of «deep players» and «shadow players» (Geertz, 1973). In British sports Hargreaves (1986) relates an historical change in values and approach to the professionalization which evolved from the late 19th century onwards, to the fact that the ideals of amateurism dominating the traditional middle class sports gradually gave way to a more dominant working class impact.

It might be argued that the professionalisation of football in Britain was followed by a professionalisation of support, as a kind of commitment and approach structured around principles of rivalry and conflict. The expression of rivalries has not been an unfamiliar phenomenon in the domestic Norwegian football universe despite the absence of a professional league, with social and geographical differences appearing as recurrent themes in different expressions of support. Yet the impulses from English football have not produced simple imitations within a Norwegian footballrelated context. As a culture and as a sport Norwegian football has grown out of a vastly different geographical and social structure. It has developed within a traditionally more homogenous social democratic political landscape and out of a morally paradigmatic sports movement bent on promoting national ideals in which the nature rather than the city, winter rather than the summer appear as the ideal space for sports. Where highly densed populations and relatively short distances between footballing venues in Britain provide options for home and away fans to explore and confront each others abilities and identities on a frequent level, this is far more limited in Norway. The distance between Oslo and Tromsø equals the distance between London and Tirana. Away support is not a familiar phenomenon in a premier league which currently hosts a very limited number of well supported teams located within a close geographical distance to each other. As a consequence, scattered monological and positive verbal support from the home fans have dominated the terrace practices in Norway rather than the dynamic negativity and militant support so often generated between opposing fans in Britain. The limited legitimate status of the participating and active spectator in Norway is further indicated by the fact that in the Norwegian language there is no equivalent word for ‘fan’ or ‘supporter’, even though the more general term ‘patriot’ is sometimes applied. The most common word is the neutral term ‘tilhenger’, which literally means ‘trailer’, associated with a more passive spectator without autonomy. In an interview with the Norwegian manager of Wimbledon F. C., Egil Olsen, I asked him what he found to be the greatest differences between managing a Norwegian and an English football. “The importance and influence of the supporters” was his immediate answer. This supports my argument that there is still a limited public

awareness of the significance of the social and cultural dynamics of football in Norway. This is also an explanatory factor for Norwegian football fans exploring the English football universe. Traditionally, the morally correct and most legitimate participant in sports in Norway is the athlete and not the spectator whose 'participation' is ideally restricted to polite and positive support.

The notorious reputation of English football fans turned the capital into a city of fear on two occasions, first the World Cup qualifier in 1993 between Norway and England, and then again at the friendly international between the two sides late in 1995. Policing was ubiquitous all over the city before and after these matches, particularly in connection with the latter which took place just half a year after the riots caused by England fans in Dublin in February 1995. The English hooligans are generally looked at with a combination of fear and fascination in Norway. The inspiration from English football fans among ardent supporters in Norway appears to be limited to different notions of audiovisual staunch support, but with no legitimacy tied to the exercise of violent pursuits within the ritual framing of domestic football matches. However, the dawn of a few smaller groups of fans supporting Norwegian club teams in a more militant fashion, have generated substantial public debate around the issues of sportsmanship and codes of conduct on the terraces. The autonomous, partisan supporter is regarded with suspicion in a public Norwegian sports context as long as this entails sarcasm apprehended as a threat to the normative and educational ambitions of the authoritative voices within sports in Norway. This was ably demonstrated when an incident of verbal abuse at a premier league match between Tromsø and Rosenborg in 1994 hit the front page of a major tabloid newspaper. Tromsø-supporters were then reported to have addressed repeated chants of "grisetryne" ("pigface") to Nils Arne Eggen, a coaching authority of Rosenborg at that time, accompanied with behaviours generally described in terms of "rowdiness" and "drunkenness", but with no physically violent incidents reported. A league match again involving Rosenborg, this time away to Lillestrøm in April 1997, produced similar sensationalising in the media. The Rosenborg goalkeeper was interviewed on a national TV-channel after the game where he told how shocked he had been at the sight of a boy, aged ca. 6, standing behind his goal, repeating chants of "Homo!". The following week, a national newspaper published a normative feature article on "terrace culture", including a guide to acceptable and unacceptable behaviours on the terraces (*Aftenposten*, 27/4/97). Apart from these incidents, discussions on topics relating to codes of conduct among players as well as supporters is a recurrent theme in the Norwegian media, all while partisan fanship is generally treated with suspicion by national and club authorities and the media. An article printed in a Brann-fanzine demonstrates the subcultural edge of some fan groups, as the author, a staunch Brann-supporter, concludes with an ideological fire resembling a 1920's revolutionary that:

I believe we are getting dangerous. We are dangerous to those who wish to develop football solely into a consumer product where the crowd is just a crowd and not active participants in the game. We represent a commitment which is scary in a world where people are supposed to be passive consumers of the goods on offer. We represent a riot against the forces of capital and the meaningless neatness of a bourgeois way of life. We are chauvinists and carriers of a local partisan activity. We represent strong emotions and express these. In our society all of this is suspicious and partly considered as hostile to the foundations of our society. A lot of people have a vested interest in portraying us a bunch of idiots and questioning our attitudes by making them exotic and suspicious, but with no touch with reality.

Concluding remarks

Tradition is in the making in contemporary Norwegian football, both in terms of styles of playing and styles of support. However, while a new, successful paradigm has evolved in a new, and possibly more hybrid, direction outwith its original strong British patron on the pitch, it remains to be seen how support in Norway will develop in the years to come. In the present situation supporter practices can still be described as worlds apart in many respects. The 1999-season produced a definite increase in reports of violence and disorder in connection with domestic football matches, especially involving the new major rivalling fan groups of Valerenga of Oslo and Brann Bergen. Nevertheless, the conditions surrounding partisan Norwegian supporter groups compared to the English remain relatively idyllic. Rather than copying everything English, the most significant aspect for Anglophile Norwegians is that English football provide an opportunity for them to play – and perhaps play deep – with identities. And the impulses from Britain appear to have been instigated not from a lack of tradition, but of a tradition without particular success. The fact that the long distance supporters are increasing in numbers in the 1990s, despite growing success for the Norwegian club and national teams, points at interesting questions for the future concerning issues of how the different cultures of football in Britain and Norway will develop. With the increasing commodification of football, it seems reasonable to predict that the two worlds may be joined in an increasingly disciplined and middle class based ethos in which the autonomous displays of support are continuously restricted and criminalised (c. f. Armstrong, 1998). Simultaneously it is interesting to see how a lot of Norwegian fans apply football as a tool for community based networking in England, demonstrating football's more cosmopolitan potential for promoting new friendships and networks in ways which are remote from the traditional tribalistic and antagonistic features of the game

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