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One Way to Sell Beer in Britain? Buy Into a Soccer Team.

An American microbrewery has made inroads in English pubs with a novel marketing strategy.



Mark Rogers his son Ben are Walsall Football Club fans and NoFo Brew Co beer drinkers. NoFo, a Georgia microbrewery, is the English team's sponsor. Joshua Bright for The New York Times



By **Tania Ganguli**

Reporting from Walsall, England

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With a portrait of Queen Victoria watching over him, a 75-year-old man frowned at a pint of something unfamiliar.

“This isn’t beer,” Michael Walker said, teasing. He was sitting in a 178-year-old pub called the Victoria (Katz) near Birmingham, England. The drink reminded him of a goat’s milk yogurt that he said helped cure his debilitating arthritis.

Sitting across from him, his son, Steve Walker, 52, and a friend, Mark Sykes, 60, laughed. It was, in fact, a pint of beer, a citrusy I.P.A. called Cowboy’s Payday, that they had placed in front of him.

The pair had chosen this particular ale because they support Walsall Football Club. The beer came from an American craft brewery, NoFo Brew Co, which is among the English soccer club's sponsors. The pub, run by a Walsall fan, has a permanent tap of Cowboy's Payday.

Michael Walker, a card-carrying member of the Campaign for Real Ale, an appreciation society for enthusiasts of traditionally brewed British beer, kept grumbling as he drank the more modern offering before him. But after a while, his companions noticed that he had downed his glass before either of them.



The Victoria (Katz) pub, a gathering place for Walsall fans, now keeps NoFo beer on tap. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

In 2022, when Bryan and Shannon Miles became investors in Walsall F.C., they saw an opportunity to expand their Georgia brewery, which then distributed only in the Southeastern United States. Now, on the strength of its connection to the team, NoFo has 150 accounts in central England and is expanding into Ireland.

“They’re doing something very savvy to build that local connection with a craft brewery,” said Ruvani de Silva, a British freelance beer journalist. “I’m surprised more breweries aren’t doing it.”

For years, British soccer fans and beer drinkers, often one and the same, have watched American money and methods infiltrate their favorite pastimes. With some exceptions, they've enjoyed it. In soccer that meant big teams (Liverpool, Arsenal, Manchester United) and small ones (Wrexham, most notably) have been funded by U.S. investors, some of them celebrities. The American influence on beer meant airy beer halls serving easy-drinking ales popped up amid traditional pubs with the warmer, yeasty brews. As the Mileses ventured into two very British realms, they arrived at a particularly friendly time.



NoFo Swift Lager available at the bar of the Walsall F.C.'s stadium. In England, drinking alcohol on the grounds is illegal during a match, so fans drink in advance, at halftime and afterward. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

A Trojan Horse

When Mr. Miles was a teenager in San Diego, the English Premier League team Aston Villa invited him to be part of its organization on what's called a schoolboy contract: He would attend school in England while training with a professional soccer organization in hopes of playing professionally.

Mr. Miles's parents said no.

So he played soccer in college, then got a job in corporate America. In 2010, he and his wife cashed out their retirement accounts to start a virtual staffing company, which eventually became worth more than \$100 million.

As their wealth grew, they wanted to diversify their assets. When a friend, Joe Garcia, approached them about opening a brewery, they went for it. Next, when another friend asked Mr. Miles if he'd be interested in joining a small investment firm, Trivela Group, to buy soccer clubs, the couple was in.



"They will follow their heart and wallet with whoever's sponsoring their club," Bryan Miles said of Walsall's fans. He and his wife, Shannon, own NoFo Brew Co. Audra Melton for The New York Times

Walsall Football Club, owned by Trivela Group, is in England's League 2, the fourth tier in English football, three below the Premier League. That made it more affordable than larger clubs. It also meant that with some improvements of the stadium grounds and other capital injections, Trivela was able to quickly build value.

"They will follow their heart and wallet with whoever's sponsoring their club," Mr. Miles said of the team's fans. "And so it just seemed to me that if we could embed the NoFo brand in that, it would be kind of like a Trojan horse." In 2023, NoFo became the sponsor on the front of the team's warm-up jerseys.



Walsall F.C. plays in League 2, several rungs below the famous Premier League, but its fans are devoted.
Joshua Bright for The New York Times

There was already a pub at the 11,000-seat stadium, which had been shut down for decades. Rehabilitating it had been a condition of the purchase of the team.

In December 2023, NoFo reached an agreement with an English brewery to produce its beer, rather than shipping it from the United States. That has lately turned out to be a sound decision. It means the uncertainty of the global tariff system won't affect it.

Nick Burton, the company's dedicated sales representative, said American beer was considered "more exotic, more interesting" than other offerings.

"I don't want to get myself out of a job here, but it's not that hard selling it," Mr. Burton said.

In 2024, NoFo produced 2,235 barrels of beer in the United States and Britain. Having begun selling in Ireland as well this year, they expect that number to increase to 3,630.

Most U.S. brewers produce fewer than 1,000 barrels per year, according to statistics compiled by the Treasury Department. But it is a top-heavy industry. The largest producers make millions of barrels of beer each year.

Craft beer became popular in Britain two decades ago, [boosted by a tax benefit given to small breweries in 2002](#). Aspiring brewers visited the United States to learn more about the process, according to Matthew Curtis, a co-founder of Pellicle, an online magazine about drinking culture. He said breweries were shipping hops from the States so they could have the same ingredients found across the Atlantic Ocean. And although the number of [breweries in Britain peaked in 2019, then steadily declined](#), the country had developed a taste for that kind of beer.

NoFo debuted at the Locker, the revitalized stadium pub, in April 2024, and in March of this year, NoFo began selling its beer in Ireland at the stadium for Drogheda United, the Irish team that the Trivela Group bought. The Trivela Group also owns an 80 percent stake in a Danish team, Silkeborg I.F., and founded a soccer team in Togo, Trivela F.C.

The Mileses said getting distribution in Ireland had been more difficult than it had been in England. But the experience has them thinking even more internationally. Mrs. Miles said they were considering expanding into other countries in Europe.

The Ryan Reynolds Model



NoFo's branding is all over the team's stadium. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

English soccer fans are accustomed to American investment in their teams. Fans of the Premier League team Manchester United, for example, were famously not delighted by their American owners, the Glazer family.

One of the most successful examples of American investment in a small soccer team is Wrexham A.F.C., a team in Wales that the actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenny bought. (The basketball player LeBron James is part of an ownership group that controls the Liverpool Football Club.) Their involvement and the money they have spent on the team have made Wrexham a tourist destination, attracted a global fan base and, most important, led to the club's playing well enough to be promoted to a better league in three consecutive seasons. A fourth promotion would land it in the English Premier League.

“You go to Wrexham, and if you went there five years ago, the kids on the streets would be wearing a Manchester United or Chelsea or a Liverpool shirt,” Mr. Curtis said. “Now you go and everyone is wearing a Wrexham shirt. It wouldn't surprise me if they managed to do the same with Walsall. People are pretty cool with their club having money.”

(Mr. Curtis is a fan of Lincoln City, which has American investors. Landon Donovan, a former U.S. national team player, is a strategic adviser for the team.)



English football fans have grown accustomed to American investment in their teams. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

And Walsall jerseys did become a lot more common around town this season as Walsall F.C. got off to a promising start. By January, it was in first place in League 2 by a wide margin and expected to be promoted to League 1. (The top three teams are automatically promoted while the fourth through seventh place teams enter a playoff for the fourth promotion.)

Trivela opted not to sign flashy and expensive players, planning to expand the team's business first. And then the team's fortunes turned, and the standings got tighter.

On April 5, Walsall faced Port Vale, a team that was threatening Walsall's standing atop the league. The winner would leave the day in first place.

The Victoria (Katz) opened at 10 a.m. so fans could drink before going to the stadium about two miles away.

In England, drinking alcohol on the grounds is illegal during a match, so attendees drink their fill in advance, at halftime and afterward. The Locker buzzed before the game, with every seat filled and a line to get drinks. Groups made up mostly of men gathered around high-top tables or picnic benches, their voices echoing in the cavernous space.



The new ownership also revitalized the Locker, the stadium drinking zone. The company has an agreement to make its beer in England, so it doesn't have to import it from the States. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

“It’s a family affair for us,” said Dale Birkett, 51, who was there with his father and his 22-year-old son, Joe. “My dad, he used to take me in the mid- to late ’80s.”

“We just really want to get out of this league, don’t we?” Joe said. “We’ve been in this for far too long.”

Joe and Dale Birkett were both drinking Cowboy's Payday, saying it was less boring than going for beer they could get just anywhere. But the eldest Birkett, Dale’s father, refused.



The season ended on a disappointing note: Walsall didn't advance to the next level of the league. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

Walsall scored early, but lost. The Port Vale fans sang taunts. After the game, Walsall's supporters returned to the Locker, but they shuffled in this time, glumly. Matters didn't improve. By the end of the day, the team had fallen to fourth place; it would end the season without being promoted to the higher league.

Still, after the loss to Port Vale, fans kept their post-match plans at the Victoria (Katz). Beer was the move after a win, and the move after a loss.

"There's a few Walsall fans in here," the bar's owner, Jason Paddock, said. "They've come to commiserate."

Tania Ganguli writes about money, power and influence in sports and how it impacts the broader culture.