



Amateur Football Combination

Spirit of Football

www.amateurfootballcombination.com

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Annual Report Season 2008/09

The 2008-09 season saw a significant changing of the guard within the Executive Committee of the Amateur Football Combination. Jim Buttress stepped down as Chairman to be replaced by David Goldring, John Monk stepped down as Secretary to be replaced by Danny McConnell, Andy McClinton stepped down as Chairman of the Fixtures Committee, to be replaced by Norman MacDonald, and Tony Julien has taken over as Chairman of the Discipline Committee. In the main the changeover has been smooth, and both Jim (as President) and John (as Chairman of the Development Committee) have remained involved, though Andy's focus nowadays is on a young family. We should also note that during the season John Monk joined the staff of the Amateur Football Alliance (AFA) as a Football Administrator – clearly the AFC provides a good grounding for those wishing to work in football administration.

A number of other senior officers have continued to put huge amounts of their time and efforts into the AFC. Bob Coates (Constitution, Referees and Fixtures) has to be the busiest man in the league, but the efforts of John Maskell (Vice Chairman and Amenities), Alan Robinson (Finance), Rob Gibbs (Spirit of Football), Mike Sainsbury (Discipline Secretary and Results), Alan Meyer (Fines) and Rory Vermeulen (Representative Team) should not go unnoticed, and perhaps most importantly, the League Match Secretaries (Bob Coates, Fred Nuckey, Ray Prewer, Warren Robertson, Mike Reilly and Jamie Brunton) and Referees Secretaries (Bob Coates again, Chad Chaudhuri and Alex Grayburn) should not be forgotten – without them we don't have our football organised, and we shouldn't ever forget that's what we're about.

The season has also seen a welcome influx of "new blood" from clubs. Chris Cooper (who will take over from Mike Sainsbury as Discipline Secretary next season) and Aaron Shah (who has already taken over as Minutes Secretary) were both new Club Representatives at the start of the season, but we've also had Jason Kilby, James Thomlinson, James Whitmarsh and Dave Harding come onto Executive, and a number of other club officers have been involved within the committees.

It's absolutely vital that we continue to recruit and involve people from the clubs – not only do we need to ensure that the league has a voice from the "coal face", but it's also important to make sure that those who are potentially the next generation of league officers to see how we run, and what is involved, so that we are continually building for the future, and ensuring that the load of running the league doesn't fall on a small number of people. All of those above, and many others, deserve our thanks for their time and commitment over the last twelve months.

Alongside the volunteer work, we should also acknowledge the need for some of the AFC "workload" to be done professionally. For those who received the weekly bulletin by post (paid for by league and club officers, but subsidised for referees) is sent out via an agency, and the collation of the data from the CRS is also done on a paid basis. This season also saw the website being put on a professional basis, which whilst meaning an extra cost to the league (and therefore clubs) also puts us on a much more secure basis – for such an essential part of league administration it cannot be left on a "spare time volunteer" basis, with the risks that that entails. One of the challenges for 2009-10 for the Communications Committee is to look at sponsorship, so that the website (which generates over 2,000,000 hits per season) can become partly, or fully, self-funding.

Playing in the Spirit of Football, Promoting Fair Play and Respect for All

This time last season, we were very positive about a proposed relationship with The Sports Shop, who were offering kit supplies and equipment at a rate which seemed to be too good to be true. Sad to say, it did indeed turn out to be just that way. The Sports Shop went bust in September 2008, and whilst they resurfaced as a company called Branded Retail (claiming to be relaunching as "Sporting Spirit") their promises of action were never matched by activity, and in March we finally took the decision to put them (and us) out of their misery. Subsequently, in June, Branded Retail themselves went into administration, which only confirmed the wisdom of our decision. A huge vote of thanks should go to Brian Watts, who to the bitter end, continued to try and see this to a successful conclusion, an effort The Sports Shop certainly didn't deserve. That the project was unsuccessful was in spite of Brian's efforts, and we should all have a good deal of sympathy for him when he has invested so much effort and time in what proved to be fruitless.

Onto happier subjects, and we were delighted not only that so many new clubs joined the AFC this season, but that on the whole they slotted into the league very efficiently, with few teething troubles, and few fines. FC Tilburg Regents, Globe Rangers, Goffs Old Boys, Lea Valley, RBL Loughton and Standard Chartered Bank have all been recommended by the Executive to have their probationary periods converted to full membership, and we hope that all will continue to be assets for the league for many years to come. It is worth noting that many of them, as well as new officers from existing clubs, attended our "New Club Officers" evening at the start of the season.

Three clubs have resigned from the league, BBC (at the start of the season), Credit Suisse and Malvern Chase, in each case due to a lack of members, though it's likely some of their players will remain within AFC football. Holland Park also struggled, failing to fulfil their fixtures and having their record expunged – whether they'll be viable next season remains to be seen. On the credit side, clearly we are still doing something right – new clubs continue to come to us, and the Executive are recommending the membership of Oakhill Tigers, Old Crosbeians, Old Grantonians and Old Pegasonians for next season. Various prospective new members are already talking to John Maskell about applications for the 2010-11 season.

One of our continuing issues is the integration of new clubs, whilst looking after existing multi-team clubs. There is a need for the Amateur Football Combination to cater for all adult male football, big clubs and small clubs, and that isn't always easy. We believe it is essential to continue to allow the larger clubs (who can offer football for players of all standard, whether Premier or 9 North) but we need to ensure that we don't end up with "clubs within clubs". A "5th XI" which contains players who are good enough to be playing higher up the club isn't actually a 5th team at all, does nothing for the league, and nothing for the "football for all" ethos. We need to continue to press home the message about running a club, and selection, properly.

Over New Year, I was contacted by one club secretary to ask what the likelihood of running Spring Cups was this season. Two months later, after we'd probably lost half of the planning games in the intervening eight weeks, the answer was clear! It's to the credit of the Fixtures Committee that despite probably the worst weather since 1999-2000, the league programme was completed on time, with minimal headaches. There were more double headers than usual, and a significantly higher number of midweek games (which began at the start of April, showing that where there's a will to get them played, they can be played) and collectively the Club Fixture Secretaries, and League Match Secretaries deserve congratulations and thanks for their efforts in encouraging/cajoling/threatening (delete as appropriate) captains and players into getting games played.

The Senior Divisions could perhaps be simplified to a tale of two clubs, both of whom exemplify the future of grassroots football. The Premier Division title went for the first time to Bealonians, who as the AFC's only Charter Standard Development Club, are a beacon for organisation, club structure, and most importantly, having a youth section which flows smoothly into the adult club. At a time when grassroots football's biggest challenge is preventing the dropout rate from under 16's to adult football, Bealonians are a perfect example of a club doing it right, and they have shown that if the foundations are right, the building itself will be strong. Throughout the season their 1st team looked the class of the Premier Division, whilst their 2nd XI looked similarly strong, and I can't think of a club more deserving of its first Premier title.

Well organised, Charter Standard, linked with a Youth Section? Step forward Old Minchendenians, whose Senior One title gave them their third promotion in three seasons. With a London Old Boys Senior Cup win and AFA Senior Cup quarter final appearances in recent seasons, they've probably been one of the strongest half dozen teams in the league for awhile, but next year will be their chance to demonstrate it. Don't be surprised if they contend for the title next season.

Congratulations should go to Albanian, winners of the AFA Middlesex/Essex Senior Cup, and again to Bealonians 2nds, who beat Chertsey Old Salesians in the final of the AFA Intermediate Cup. There were also wins for HAC 2nds (AFA Surrey/Kent Intermediate Cup) and Old Kingsburians 3rds (AFA Minor Cup). In the London Old Boys Cups, congratulations should be offered to UCL Academicals who defended their title (don't mention their league record in the Premier please) and also to Pegasus, winners of the Challenge Cup. Congratulations also to William Fitt 2nds (Intermediate Cup), Old Edmontonians III (Junior Cup), Old Aloysians V (Minor Cup), Lea Valley (Drummond Cup), Old Suttonians VI (Olympian Cup) and Cardinal Manning Old Boys (Nemean Cup).

Amidst the congratulations, a few brick-bats. Despite warnings and correspondence with the clubs involved, the Fixtures Committee had to withhold trophies from Old Uffingtonians 3rds (1 West) and Old Kingsburians 3rds (2 West), in both cases because the clubs were fielding 3rd teams obviously stronger than their own 2nd teams. It's disappointing for everyone to get the end of the season and have such an unsatisfactory ending, but most of all for all of the other clubs in their divisions, who week in, week out, played against teams who weren't playing fair and square. Disappointing too that two fixtures remained unplayed, involving both Old Uxonians teams – when a club enters the league it ought to understand the commitment to ensuring it completes the season.

A number of other clubs also gave cause for concern. Egbertians were interviewed by the Fixtures Committee at the start of the season, and a number of Spirit of Football issues arose during the season, and Old Camdenians requested the withdrawal of a side for disciplinary reasons for the third season in five, and finished bottom of the Spirit of Football table. Old Thorntonians are due to be interviewed by the Fixtures Committee prior to the new season, with concerns about their overall administration and also movement of players, which in one case led to a 2nd XI match being postponed on Saturday morning due to lack of players despite the club fielding their 3rd XI (including two substitutes). Old Meadonians, Mickleham Old Boxhillians and Old Vaughanians all had issues with administration and high levels of fines.

On the fines front, congratulations should go to Heathrow Seniors (a hat-trick of seasons without fines), Birkbeck College, Cardinal Manning, Old Sedcopians and University of Hertfordshire (all two seasons in a row without fines), Globe Rangers, Lea Valley and RBL Loughton (all new members, no fines) and also to Citigroup, Mayfield Athletic and Old Woodhouseians, all of whom had "clean sheets" for the season. Whilst fines help to keep subscriptions down, it's good to see some clubs running so efficiently. For the record, an appendix to this report lists the amount paid in fines each season by every club since the formation of the Amateur Football Combination back in 2002.

The 2008-09 season saw the launch of the Football Association's RESPECT programme, which the Amateur Football Combination has heartily embraced. Rob Gibbs and the Spirit of Football Committee have spent much of the season looking at RESPECT, what it involves, and how we can dovetail it with Spirit of Football, as it is our intention to run the two in tandem, at least until RESPECT has become so well established that it has overtaken Spirit of Football as a "brand".

In essence, the two campaigns are very similar. Although RESPECT has perhaps a broader church, with significant elements tuned towards youth football, one can't help but conclude that Spirit of Football (of which the Football Association are very aware) is one of the forerunners of RESPECT, and it's to Rob's credit (and many others, both within the Amateur Football Combination, and other leagues in the country) that the need to improve behaviour has reached the national agenda.

Without doubt, RESPECT and Spirit of Football remain "long term" projects – changing behaviour and attitudes overnight is almost impossible – whether or not we like it the AFC cannot simply swim alone against the tide of society, but the more we can do to improve behaviour, and to implant in our

members' minds that the extremes of indiscipline are unacceptable the better. The more support we get from the higher echelons of the game the better – most participants look up to the professionals as role models, and their behaviour is inevitably reflected at grassroots level, not just in youth football, but adult football too. The phrases “role models” and “responsibility to the game” may seem old fashioned, but they're valid nonetheless, and we can only hope that professional players (and particularly managers) will renew commitments to this next season.

In the meantime, Rob Gibbs' work during the season must once again be congratulated. Rob has continued to cajole and remind clubs of their responsibilities when required (and sometimes, been in a position to congratulate them on good reports) and working in parallel with Mike Sainsbury, who has liaised with the Amateur Football Alliance on the more serious disciplinary issues, they have provided an invaluable part of league administration. Mike has been Discipline Secretary for the first seven years of the AFC, and he steps down to be succeeded by Chris Cooper, who has some big shoes to fill.

Thirty of the AFC's clubs triggered various stages of the AFA Disciplinary system. Whilst reaching any stage is disappointing, it's particularly concerning to see two of them reach stage 3, and a number reached stage 2. We hope all will be taking action to ensure improvements in future seasons. It's particularly disappointing to see a number of Charter Standard Clubs within the list, and during the season the AFC Executive had dialogue with both the AFA and the Football Association to ensure that disciplinary records were an integral part of the Charter Standard “Kitemark”, and we would hope that our Charter Standard Clubs lead the way in reducing on-field indiscipline.

Stage 3 (1 club): William Fitt.

Stage 2 (13 clubs): Albanian, Bealonians, Enfield Old Grammarians, Glyn Old Boys, Old Aloysians, Old Danes, Old Kingsburians, Old Manorians, Old Meadonians, Old Minchendenians, Old Parmiterians, Old Salvatorians, Wood Green Old Boys.

Stage 1 (16 clubs): Centymca, Chertsey Old Salesians, Egbertians, Hale End Athletic, John Fisher Old Boys, Kings Old Boys, Mill Hill County Old Boys, Old Camdenians, Old Edmontonians, Old Josephians, Old Tiffinians, Old Uffingtonians, Old Vaughanians, Old Wokingians, Parkfield, Southgate County.

Administratively the season has seen a number of changes. Most notable was the introduction of the SMS Results system, provided for us by the Football Association's Full-Time system (a happy by-product of which is that Danny McConnell is now working part-time for the FA as an advisor on the system). Not only has this removed the need for Fred Nuckey to spend his Sunday morning talking to an answerphone, but it means that results are generally available on the AFC website within minutes of games finishing on a Saturday, though the sheer volume of AFC traffic did cause the system a few hiccoughs late in the season, which should be ironed out by next season. Mike Sainsbury has worked tirelessly at monitoring these and correcting any errors made by clubs. It's also notable that the SMS system has seen fines for failure to report results all but disappear – it's very difficult to forget to report a result when you get a text message reminding you of the need to do so.

Behind the scenes, we are continuing to develop our use of Full-Time. Refereeing appointments are now registered (visible to everyone) and so are their marks (access to these is restricted) and next season we shall give clubs the option (emphasis on “option”!) to use it for Player Registration (no need to keep spreadsheets) and also to log team sheets, and record goalscorers and other match statistics. We'll also be using options to have emails automatically sent to clubs and referees, with updated details of matches involving them.

On the refereeing front, Bart O'Toole and Bob Coates have continued to develop the AFC's Refereeing Panel, and recruit more officials to the league. Coverage in the north of the league is now superb, and Bob (assisted by Chad Chaudhuri and Alex Grayburn) has been making a particular effort to find new referees in the south and the west. Assuming the AGM approve the motion, next season we shall run a trial in the Premier Division of providing assistants for all games. We hope that

not only will this improve the profile of the league's flagship division but also that it will help us with recruitment and retention of referees.

Unfortunately, Bart has had to stand down as Chairman of the Referees' Committee, though he'll continue to chair the Rules Revision Committee. He leaves the Referees' Committee in rude health, and we're delighted that Stan Rosenthal, one of our best Referees (and a Middlesex FA Assessor/Trainer/Mentor) is taking over, once again with big shoes to fill.

The Constitution Committee, under the guidance of Bob Coates, has again had to wrestle with the issues of travel, in particular within the south and west of the league. North London has always seemed to be relatively smooth, with the North Circular (usually) reliable, but travel in the south and west has always been an issue. The AFC Survey in 2008 identified that most people considered 30 minutes travel to be acceptable, but 60 minutes was more marginal. In part this led to the creation of the South-East and South-West regional divisions for last season, but this experiment has not been popular with many clubs. It has been felt that although it improves the travel position for most clubs, it does not allow sufficient movement for teams within divisions. For 2009-10 we are returning to a purely "south" region, and we need to accept that travel, and competitive football, will remain a difficult balance for the lower regions of the league.

The Representative Side had a quiet but solid season, with wins against the London Legal League and Yorkshire Old Boys, draws against Cambridge University and the Arthurian League, and a defeat against the Southern Amateur League. The latter game came a month after the SAL had represented England in the UEFA Regions Cup (held in Italy), with the SAL team having been treated (and coached/trained) like a semi-professional outfit for much of October, and they looked a class better and fitter. Equally of interest, when we met the Arthurian League in March, a fortnight after they'd also played the SAL, they felt the AFC had been the stronger side, suggesting the fitness gap had quickly closed. Clearly our representative football is of a high standard, but when the players have the chance to take their football really seriously, there's scope for a step up in standard.

With the National League Systems Cup running on a biannual basis, 2009-10 sees our second tilt at the competition, and Rory Vermeulen and Paddy Rumley are already thinking ahead to the new campaign. This begins in September against the Bedfordshire Football League (our first victims in the last competition, who will doubtless wish to avenge their 4-0 defeat), and hopefully to a long run – perhaps beyond the semi-final stage we reached last time.

The AFC Dinner in May perhaps will prove to be a watershed. Although it was superbly organised as always by Miles Briggs and the Dinner Committee, turnout was disappointing (ca. 260 attendees). This meant it made a significant financial loss as we have to guarantee payment 300 tickets to the venue. Without doubt, some of the reasons were the current economic climate, but the ticket price (which is already subsidised to the tune of over £10 per head from league funds) may well be prohibitive for many, particularly amongst players. The biggest problem we have is that to find a venue which caters for 350-400 people is very restrictive, and it might be that if we look at some of the less expensive venues, then we'll have to limit the number of tickets available, simply because of size restrictions.

Overall, the 2008-09 has run smoothly, and on behalf of everyone involved with the Amateur Football Combination, I'd like to offer our thanks not only to the dozens of league officers who make sure this is one of, if not the, best grassroots leagues in the country, but also to those club officers and referees whose efforts ensure that we continue to develop our league, run efficiently and provide football for thousands of players throughout the London area.

Danny McConnell (Hon. Secretary) – June 2009