



Amateur Football Combination

Spirit of Football

www.amateurfootballcombination.com

President: Jim Buttress **Chairman:** David Goldring **Treasurer:** Alan Robinson
Secretary: Danny McConnell, PO Box 605, Bromley, Kent, BR2 0YQ. Tel: 020 8325 2448.
Email: secretary@amateurfootballcombination.com

Annual Report Season 2009/10

Discipline and Spirit of Football

It's unfortunate to begin on a negative note, but the 2009-10 season has been dominated by disciplinary issues, both at club and individual level. The league has faced a number of challenges, with half a dozen clubs called up before the League Executive, but on an individual level a number of assaults, with police involvement, and further serious issues.

Elsewhere within my report I shall outline the most serious cases, and the action taken, but I believe that it is time that we face up to the challenges of the modern day, and understand that football, and the environments we play in, have changed, and our approach needs to change accordingly.

Traditionally "AFA football" and by extension, our football, has been based to a large degree on trust – we work on the assumption that other clubs will run themselves efficiently and effectively, and within the "spirit of the game". However, increasingly this needs monitoring, particularly as many clubs become fractured, and "clubs within clubs". The need for the "Spirit of Football" campaign only emphasises this point – what most people may have considered second nature in terms of behaviour thirty years ago (and some still do) isn't necessarily to be taken for granted, and the campaign has always aimed to re-emphasise that point. I believe the Spirit of Football campaign is an essential part of our football, working alongside the "Respect" programme (still struggling to impose itself against a backdrop of apathy from the professional game, and cynicism from the media whose only interest is a quick fix) – the standards and behaviour in football have been declining for thirty years, we won't arrest and address that decline in a few seasons.

Increasingly, we need to look at Spirit of Football, and particularly the marks awarded by clubs and referees, and the comments that accompany them to judge our clubs – if people don't enjoy their games against a club, we should be questioning their membership of the league. It is worth noting the bottom six clubs in the rankings the last four seasons:-

2006-07 – *Valley Park Rangers, Marsh, Chislehurst Sports, Old Tenisonians, Ealing Association, Zurich Eagle Star.*

2007-08 – Old Tollingtonians, Old Wokingians, William Fitt, Temple Bar, *Chislehurst Sports, Holland Park Old Boys*

2008-09 – Old Bromleians, *Malvern Chase, Centymca, William Fitt, Old Tenisonians, Old Camdenians*

2009-10 – Temple Bar, Old Josephians, Old Bromleians, Old Camdenians, Old Danes, *Centymca.*

Of the eighteen clubs listed, six (in italics) have since left the league!

This season we've had two separate cases (one from an AFC game, one involving an AFC club) where the Metropolitan Police are investigating assaults and clubs, and the competitions concerned, are unable to provide the details of the individual concerned. That is simply unacceptable, and if we are to claim we run organised football, we need to change.

In total, ten matches involving AFC clubs (whether within the league, or outside cups) were abandoned this season due to misconduct.

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

Administratively, we need to face up to the need for proper player registration. Far too many clubs simply don't know who is playing for them each week, and don't make any sort of check on the background of their players. Outside of the AFA player registration is the norm, and efficiently done – without a player's name, address and date of birth, he doesn't play for a club. We need to change, and adopt that attitude, and clubs need to be held to account for their members. Full-Time can assist us to manage it efficiently and quickly, and this will be a topic for next season.

At its essence any football league is comprised of a number of clubs who wish to play football against each other. The league should not be responsible for the individual policing of clubs, but should simply set a framework and set of agreed standards by which the clubs agree to play their football. If clubs are not prepared to abide by these, then we should be prepared to remove them from the league. Arguments such as “we've been members for 100 years” and so forth are irrelevant – what matters is how the club behaves now, and if the current club officers are not prepared to be appropriate guardians of the club's history, I'm afraid we need to make tough decisions.

On the discipline/behaviour front, too many clubs gave cause for concern, and I think it is appropriate within this report to outline, in brief, the issues involved and the actions taken by the clubs:-

Old Tenisonians – in March 2010, the club were called up before the league following a number of incidents of violent conduct, and threats toward referees. The main areas of concern were the 4th XI (which over the past 5-6 seasons has been a regular source of complaints, both in terms of behaviour and playing strength) and 5th XI, and both were removed from the constitution. A number of conditions were set for the club, which they have failed to completely adopt, and as such their membership is on the agenda for the Annual General Meeting.

Old Danes – Old Danes discipline record remains poor, as does their Spirit of Football marking, and the club have been interviewed by the Executive Committee for four of the last six years, including May this year. There seems to be little appetite within the club to address their issues and as such, we have also included their membership on the agenda for the Annual General Meeting.

Centymca – finished last in the Spirit of Football marks and would have been called up to Executive, but instead have left the league.

William Fitt – were called up before the Executive in November, following a poor start to the season both in terms of Spirit of Football and Discipline. The club were receptive to the concerns issued, and this was reflected in their Spirit of Football, which rose from a mark of 6.86 in November to 7.23 at the end of the season. There is still work to be done, and the club are aware of that, but I and they would be surprised if we didn't see them continuing to improve.

Old Camdenians – were called up before the Executive Committee in May, having withdrawn from the competition in March. The trigger was an assault, the one being investigated by the Metropolitan Police, by one of their committee, but underlying issues for a number of seasons have been the club's inability to field four sides, and recruiting players without sufficient checks and causing further disciplinary issues. Once again, the club have been receptive to the concerns and issues, and have acknowledged their failings, and it is their intention to play next season with only two sides, which they believe is practical and manageable at the current time.

Old Manorians – were called up before the Executive Committee in May, with a number of disciplinary issues surrounding various sides. Once again, the club were receptive, and have reduced the number of teams they run to a level they consider manageable.

Old Uffingtonians – were not called up before the Executive Committee, but a number of concerns were raised about their 2nd XI. The club have been proactive, a number of that team have left the club, and we are confident their issues are a matter of the past.

The following clubs reached stages 1/2/3 of the AFA Disciplinary Code:-

AFA Stage 3 – Old Danes, Old Manorians

AFA Stage 2 – Old Edmontonians, Old Salvatorians, Old Vaughanians.

AFA Stage 1 – Albanian, Bealonians, Centymca, Egbertians, Fitzwilliam Old Boys, Hale End, Marsh, Old Bromleians, Old Camdenians, Old Edmontonians, Old Josephians, Old Minchendenians, Old Parmiterians, Old Uffingtonians, William Fitt.

Serious Incidents – finally, I believe it is right to report a number of serious incidents:-

Darren Brown (Wandsworth Borough) – was suspended Sine Die by the AFA for assaulting a referee in September (the club had already banned him indefinitely).

Eamonn Meaney (Old Minchendians) – was suspended Sine Die by the AFA for assaulting a referee in October (the club had already banned him indefinitely).

Daniel Morgan-Blake (Marsh) – suspended for a total of 315 days for various incidents, including assaulting a referee in November 2009. The club banned him to the end of the season and should they wish to re-register him, the league will need to consider this under rule 8e.

Kyle Burt (Old Tenisonians) – suspended for 112 days by the AFA for violent head-to-head butting in November 2009.

Andrew McHugh (Albanian) – suspended for 133 days by the AFA for Swearing at referee after being substituted/Refusing to leave vicinity of pitch/continuing to abuse referee during and after game/threatening referee after game/giving false name in November 2009 (club suspension of two weeks).

Tony Fisher (Old Tenisonians) – suspended 112 days by the AFA for Violent Head-to-Head Contact on an opponent in January 2010 (the club suspended him for four weeks). He subsequently attempted to play for Wandsworth Borough whilst under suspension (once aware of the suspension, Wandsworth refused to allow him to play).

Jamie Venis (Old Edmontonians) – suspended for 140 days by the AFA for an assault on an opponent, breaking his cheekbone (the club had already banned him indefinitely) in February 2010.

Ricky Baker (Old Parmiterians) – suspended Sine Die by the AFA for an assault on an opponent, breaking his nose with a head-butt (the club had already banned him indefinitely) in March 2010.

Paul Redford (Old Camdenians) – suspended for 112 days by the AFA for an assault, breaking an opponents nose/cheekbone with a head-butt (the Metropolitan Police are still investigating this incident) in April 2010.

One of the changes we'll be making from next season is for clubs to report with their weekly results any cases of serious/notable misconduct, and what action the club have taken against those involved. It's only right (and necessary) to hold clubs to account for the actions of their members.

Running the AFC

One of the happier tasks of this report is to pay tribute to the army of volunteers who, at league level, give up their time to the running of the Amateur Football Combination. After the flux of the 2008-09 season, this year was somewhat more settled, though the Executive Committee were particularly busy with the various disciplinary issues. I don't really want to pick out anyone individually for their time and work, as so many have been responsible for the smooth running of the season.

A number of officers are looking to reduce their commitments for next season, although most will continue at some level, but we should offer thanks to Rob Gibbs (stepping down as Chairman of Spirit of Football), Bart O'Toole (stepping down from various roles, though continuing with Rules Revision), Ray Prewer (stepping down from AFA, Executive and Fixtures) and Jim Buttress (stepping down as President). Miles Briggs (Dinner Committee) had to step down at the start of the season, having moved to Cambridge and set up a new business, and our thanks go to him for many years of dinner organisation, and also to Andrew Cashmore-Till and Rob Gibbs for filling the gap.

On the positive side, I'd like to highlight the contribution (and future contributions!) of some of the new blood. Aaron Shah has added the role of AFA Representative to that of Minutes Secretary, and with Rob Gibbs looking to take a back seat, Martin Armstrong, James Whitmarsh and Ben Roberts have agreed to take a hands-on role within the Spirit of Football Committee.

We still need to 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 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.

Spirit of Football and Discipline

One key change we have made for 2010-11 is to merge the Spirit of Football and Discipline Committees. Part of this is driven by the FA, but it is really an acknowledgement of the boundaries that apply between league and county football association. As a league we decide which clubs participate in our competition, and who has membership, but the responsibility for individual player discipline lies with the County Football Associations (the Amateur Football Alliance for most of our clubs).

As such, we need to move our emphasis. Membership of the league should be focussed on behaviour, and "Spirit of Football", though we shall of course continue to monitor discipline, and clubs should be held to account on their own behaviour, and their discipline codes. However, with much of the league often operating "away from official discipline" (whether we like it or not, most club referees will not send in disciplinary reports) we have to have a balance, and it seems only logical that the two strands – Discipline and Spirit of Football should work together, and we have therefore combined them into one committee.

One area where this impacted on us was the new rule (8e) that came in as part of the FA's Standard Code of Rules. Essentially this is aimed at giving some standardisation to the disciplinary criteria by which leagues can ban players from future participation within the league. At present, it requires a player to have received 112 days of suspensions within the last two seasons, and to have offended more than once – I think most of the league think this threshold should be lower, and it's an issue the FA are considering and consulting upon, though as the league has never sought to ban a player before, it is simply a new "weapon" for us, and one we are likely to use. Any player in future who breaches these criteria can expect to be called before the League Executive, with a view to having their registration and future participation in the league cancelled.

AFC Dinner

Thanks to Andrew-Cashmore Till and Rob Gibbs, the AFC Dinner proved a great success, with the consensus being that the move from The Brewery to The Oval was a good decision. Nevertheless, the work required to cajole clubs to attend is huge, and probably isn't sustainable in the long term.

Whether we like it or not, if the league is to have an Annual Dinner to present its trophies, it will be expensive (catering for the size of the league, our choice of venues is limited) and increasingly it seems most clubs will only turn up if they've won a trophy. During next season we need to consider carefully a variety of options – should clubs be required to buy two tickets as part of their subscription, should we consider moving the dinner back to October/November or should we indeed have a dinner at all? There seem to be no easy answers.

Sponsorship and Funding

Our ongoing efforts to secure sponsorship and funding for the league, and reduce the burden on clubs, had two aspects during the season. First of all, the administrator for Branded Retail tried chasing us for payment of armbands at a price we'd never agreed, and thanks should go to Martin Armstrong for resolving this, with no cost to the league. The whole Sports Shop/Branded Retail fiasco is finally something we can consign to history.

On a more positive note, Brian Watts secured some limited sponsorship (£1000 per season) from Carling to support the Spirit of Football branding. This is relatively low key, with Carling keen to establish some connections with clubs (I know some clubs have already been in touch with them looking to sort out a deal) but it does illustrate the opportunity that is there to find more sponsorship, and support league costs which administratively seem certain to have to rise.

Some expertise in this area would be invaluable to the league. I don't believe anyone on the League Executive would claim to be a "marketing person", but I'm sure there are many out there within the league, and a volunteer(s) who is prepared to spend some time and effort helping us to sort out this area would be very much appreciated.

New Clubs

Four new clubs joined the AFC last season:- Oakhill Tigers, Old Crosbeians, Old Grantonians and Old Pegasonians, and all have seamlessly slotted into the league. If there's been a negative report about any of them, I haven't heard it, and we're delighted that the league continues to have a reputation which attracts new clubs, and the Executive are happy to recommend their full membership for next season.

This season we only have one new applicant, Somerville Old Boys (Somerville College, Oxford University) and we look forward to them joining the league for next season.

The issue of player movement continues to be a problem, and for those running multi-team clubs there is still a challenge. Whilst only one trophy (2 West, from Old Salvatorians) was withheld, I think a number of clubs would struggle to put hands on hearts and claim their 4th XI isn't stronger than their 3rd XI (and so forth) and this does nothing for the "football for all" ethos. We need to continue to press home the message about running a club, and selection, properly.

Bad Weather

If we thought 2008-09 was bad, the winter of 2009-10 was the worst for ten years. By the end of February we'd completed just over half of the league programme, and a busy April/May loomed.

It is to the immense credit of clubs, and club fixture secretaries that all but one league game was played (and the club concerned Old Tiffinians, were denied promotion as a consequence) with a significant number of midweek games played. I suspect many club fixture secretaries were surprised (as well as league officers) how efficiently most games were organised and fulfilled, and I can only applaud all concerned for their efforts. No excuse for saying it can't be done in future seasons!!!

National League System

During the season, we also engaged in a consultation about the National League System, and whether the AFC should seek to enter "the Pyramid" (in theory giving a club a direct route to the Premiership). Whilst an interesting exercise, I think what it emphasised is that, at least at present, we are so far away from being viable in terms of facilities that it's a pipe dream. The level we were considering ("Step 7") is effectively a feeder into the likes of the Combined Counties/Hellenic/South Midlands Spartan Leagues, and for a club to look to progress to that level, they need floodlighting and various other options. For the vast majority (if not every club) within the AFC that remains impossible – all too often we'll fall down simply because of lack of support from local councils.

Nevertheless, it has started a debate about whether we should have minimum standards of facilities for our Premier Division, and that will continue to be a point of consideration for next season.

Referees

Our refereeing panel continues to grow and strengthen. Amongst the various London counties our name and reputation improves year on year, and we find more referees joining the league, and our coverage improving. The "neutral assistants" experiment was generally successful, certainly in terms of recruiting referees, and we are recommending we run it for a second season.

We should however acknowledge that there are some areas for improvement – some times we had complaints about the quality of the assistants, and we need to acknowledge there's a learning curve for those officials, many of whom are running a line for the first time. It is a difficult skill (in some ways more difficult than refereeing) and we shall be running workshops for officials before the season aimed at helping them to run the lines.

One further "comment" from a few of the Premier Clubs was the cost of neutral assistants, with a suggestion that perhaps the league (i.e. all clubs) should pay for the assistants. The Executive Committee didn't agree with this suggestion - I think our feeling is that if the Premier Clubs are lucky enough to have three officials at a game, they should be prepared to pay for them!

Overall however, I think the league continues to be superbly served by its panel of referees, and by the referees' committee and our particular thanks should go to Bob Coates, Chad Chaudhuri and Alex Grayburn for their efforts in looking after our referees. Congratulations also Philip Gilmore, John Stockman and Mike Barron, recipients of the AFC's McCarthy Awards for 2009-10

Non League Paper and Press

The AFC continues to have a regular column in the Non League Paper, and it's a real shame that Stuart Lock has had to step down from writing it after doing a superb job this season, raising the bar quite a few notches higher from its previous author (me), and we owe him a huge debt of thanks. Raj Mannick will take it over for next season, and I hope all clubs, but particularly the senior ones, will be supportive of him in providing match reports.

For next season, the requirement of clubs to telephone the Syms family with press scorelines will be removed. Unfortunately, this had become an exercise in futility, simply because none of the media outlets actually processed and published our scores. Whereas ten years ago most Sunday and Monday papers would include AFC results, that's now a thing of the past, so it seems pointless asking clubs and the Syms to spend time on an exercise with no end product. Our thanks to them for many years of collating (and chasing) the press results.

Charter Standard

Progress with Charter Standard remains slow, with only eighteen AFC clubs currently signed up. I would hope that by this time next year that number will have doubled or trebled – Charter Standard isn't hard to achieve, probably the main "issue" for clubs is having sufficient Emergency Aiders to qualify, and given that course is simply "preservation of life" I can't believe any club would argue that they shouldn't have someone present at games who is capable of emergency aid if needed.

Representative Team

Last season perhaps gave the league a reality check with regard to the Representative Team and the National League Systems Cup. After 2007-08 and the run to the semi-finals, I think the feeling was that this was the focus of the season, and all of our traditional games were simply "warm-ups". Instead, in September we travelled to Bedfordshire, and fell at the first hurdle on penalties.

The remainder of the season saw some weather issues, but two wins (over the London Legal League and Southern Amateur League, coming from 2-0 down to win 3-2) were offset by defeat to The Champions (Bealonians) and Yorkshire Old Boys. We shouldn't forget these games are our "bread and butter", and the National League Systems Cup the icing on the cake.

Thanks again to Rory Vermeulen and Paddy Rumley for their efficient running of the team.

AFC Awards

Congratulations are due to Heathrow Seniors, Kings Old Boys and UCL Academicals, winners of the Spirit of Football awards for 2009-10. Also congratulations to Heathrow Seniors for winning the Ken Fletcher Club Development Award, and University of Hertfordshire, winners of the Ken Elbourne Hospitality Award.

On the Pitch

Last, but not least, the reason why we exist. To play football.

The Premier Division showed a significant changing of the guard, with Albanian winning the league for the first time, and looking the class of the division, though newly promoted Old Minchendenians chased them all of the way, and ought to contend for a number of seasons as a young team continue to develop. Albanian made it a double with a deserved win in the London Old Boys Senior Cup against Old Parmiterians.

At the wrong end it was a shock to see Old Aloysians implode, and the club have some challenges as they regroup lower down, and Clapham Old Xaverians' stay in the top division proved to be brief.

Promoted from Senior One are champions Old Suttonians and Old Belgravians, both of whom lasted the distance somewhat more effectively than Old Salvatorians, Old Ignatians and UCL Academicals, all of whom faded in the final straight. Senior Two saw Old Uffingtonians take the title, whilst Southgate County's revival sees them promoted. At Senior Three level, Old Edmontonians and Pegasus took the north and south titles.

Further down the league, Albanian Reserves comfortably won Intermediate North, whilst Old Tenisonians were dominant in Intermediate South, and Old Isleworthians squeaked past Birkbeck College in Intermediate West.

Congratulations should also go to Albanian 3rds (2 North), Economicals 3rds (2 South), Royal British Legion Loughton (3 North), Old Parmiterians 4ths (4 North) and Old Parmiterians 7ths (8 North), all of whom won their league titles without suffering a single defeat.

And offer some sympathy to Old St Marys 4ths and Wood Green Old Boys 4ths, neither of whom recorded a league win, although Wood Green did win a game, only to see it expunged when their opponents were withdrawn from the league!

Summary

I won't apologise for what is a somewhat negative summary of the 2009-10 season. I've tried to cover what I consider to be the important aspects of the season, and it has, quite simply, been the worst in terms of discipline in my time as a football administrator. Indeed, the writing (and I trust, reading) of this summary, and particularly the first section, is quite shocking in highlighting what a bad season it has been.

We shouldn't forget that the problems come from a small minority of clubs and players, but we should be strong enough to ask why we spend so much time on dealing with them, and their problems. It is right that we should be prepared to spend time to remind clubs of their responsibilities, and help them back on course if they are willing to be guided, but we have to be prepared to deal with those who are not, and an ongoing part of that is for us as a league to be more open about the disciplinary problems within, even if that means airing some dirty laundry in public.

I believe the Amateur Football Combination to be unique within the world of football – we generally play our football in the right spirit, and we try and cater for all standards of footballer, whether it be the Premier Division, for players of a semi-professional standard, or 9 North (for players who aren't!). "We are all aware we have to go back to work on Monday morning" should be something that defines us – it's only football, there are more important things in life.

Administratively, the season has run smoothly, albeit with a lot of extra work for many of the league and club officers, and everyone within the league owes a debt of gratitude to all of them.

The vast majority of those involved in our football want to see our standards maintained, if not improved, so over the summer I would ask every club, officer, and player, to take stock, and play their part in ensuring that the 2009-10 season is simply a blip, and that from next season, we return to the league I believe we all dearly love and cherish.

Danny McConnell (Hon. Secretary) – June 2010