



100 reasons to be cheerful

There is a tendency to get too negative in soccer. We see it worst of all in these editorials. Somehow the bad bits always steal the limelight, in spite of me trying ever so hard not to be a miserable bastard the whole time. So to balance the slate, let's – for once – reflect on a few of the really neat things about New Zealand soccer. Make your own list if you like.

1. Watching 5 and 6-year-olds who really know what they are doing on a Saturday morning.
2. Giving your nearest rivals a good tanking in the local derby.
3. Andrew Dewhurst radio commentaries. Not forgetting Kevin Fallon in the comments seat, of course.
4. Having a pint with your mates before the game.
5. Car doors at Ericsson.
6. Beating Australia. Even nearly beating them is good enough, sometimes.
7. Seeing your team play crap all day then winning through a dodgy last-minute penalty.
8. National league defenders who appeal for offside from goal kicks.
9. Being knocked out of the Chatham Cup and hearing the coach say at the aftermatch speech: *"That's good, because now we can concentrate on the league"*.
10. Refs with bad haircuts or joke moustaches.
11. Correctly predicting that Chris Jackson will be the first player to be booked tonight.
12. Watching Simon Milton – who one day will be discovered by a major television concern -- impersonating Chris Turner.
13. Chris Turner impersonating Simon Milton. (Er, not quite as common).
14. Sprinklers going off in the middle of a match.
15. Clubrooms with Monteith's beers on tap.
16. The Swanz Cup final. Always entertaining.
17. Stopping at the Rangiriri Hotel on the way home after a particularly satisfying away win.
18. Seeing Christchurch City paying \$9 to beat Waitakere at the TAB and having the bottle to back them.
19. Alf Stamp, Keith Nelson, and the good old days.
20. Theme evenings on Bloc 5.
21. Your centreback passes the drugs test, even though he works in a gym (okay, so this doesn't happen so often in Auckland).
22. Confetti on the terraces.
23. Paul Halford going on a mazy dribble.
24. Making the Confederation Cup finals in 1999.
25. Getting replacement sponsorship for the national league so quickly.
26. Coaches who blame the ugly away strip when they lose.
27. The crowd being far bigger than you expected.
28. The crowd being far bigger than officials expected.
29. The crowd being so bloody big they open another gate and let the kids in for free. (The Albany Special.)

30. A team sing-song on the bus on the way home.
31. Late-night impersonations of Shane Rufer.
32. Beating the Aussies. (We won the first throw-in against Australia in the World Cup qualifier. And it paid \$1.80 at the TAB.)
33. Still having souvenir drink coasters from when we made the World Cup finals in 1982.
34. Fat bastards who reckon they can still play.
35. Fat bastards who actually can still play.
36. Derek Walker soccer quizzes.
37. David White (Central) knowing the answers at Derek Walker quizzes.
38. Clubs who give sponsored cars to players without driving licences.
39. Lower Hutt City programme covers (sorry national league clubs, but these are the best in New Zealand).
40. Kids using shirts and bags for goals down at the park.
41. House of Football. (Okay, so we occasionally criticise it, but it's still given us plenty of laughs).
42. Billy McClure playing for the Fencibles Youth team and really enjoying himself.
43. Sitter! still having the odd good article, even if it's not as funny as it used to be.
44. Billy Harris in the Sunday-Star Times.
45. Kingz players who watch from Bloc 5 when they can't make the squad for home matches.
46. Jeremy Ruane's northern league wrap-ups on www.sportsworld.co.nz
47. A dog on the pitch.
48. Nutmegs, but only when the player remembers to call it.
49. Scoring a goal out of nothing.
50. The morning after a big win.
51. Predicting the Man of the Match award will go to the teenager making his debut.
52. The Man of the Match award duly going to the teenager making his debut.
53. Chris Zoricich's goal v USA.
54. Buying your first All Whites replica shirt.
55. Getting to see the All Whites live. (Not always easy if you live out of Auckland).
56. Half time chips at Bill McKinlay Park.
57. Swapping ends at half time.
58. The lack of security guards at national league matches.
59. Mark Burton going on a run.
60. Simon Eaddy's red and white mouthguard.
61. A Rab Smith article.
62. Brian Turner wigs.
63. The ball strikes the ref. Always a huge belly laugh.
64. A nice red wine with lunch before the match at Kiwitea St.
65. Striking a deal with Rex Dawkins.
66. Back heels in your own penalty box.
67. Swapping stories about Joe McGrath.
68. Reading in the paper that your club has made a new signing.
70. Mark Cossey's curling free kicks.
71. John Adshead.
72. Paul Urlovic goal celebrations.
73. A good stoush in front of the grandstand.
74. An unbeaten run.
75. Life membership awards for anyone but Charlie.
76. Wynton stating the bleedin' obvious on television.
77. Sitter! T Shirts.

78. Not having to apologise to the opposition for the state of the pitch out there today.
79. Mark Elrick's impeccable grooming.
80. Seeing a personalised soccer number plate for the first time.
81. Refs in way-too-short shorts.
82. Having the best fans in the league.
83. Re-reading "The Impossible Dream" by Ian Garner and Ian Walter.
84. Danny Halligan coming out of retirement.
85. Coaches blackboard sessions that nobody can understand.
86. Ryan Nelsen being as good as any Aussie defenders.
87. Winning the meat raffle after your team has scored its biggest home win of the season.
88. Predicting the young No 9 will be a star before any of your mates do.
89. Central United's Brazil strip.
90. Signing an import who's "a bit special".
91. Hearing the import your deadliest rivals have signed has "failed to settle".
92. Floodlit matches in summer.
93. Memories of Newmarket Park.
94. Memories of Muir Park for that matter.
95. Rallying around your club in its hour of greatest need.
96. Catching a Riki Van Steeden clearance in the stand.
97. Listening to John Cameron criticising fellow refs.
98. Catching one sweet on the volley.
100. Reading a "soccer list" and agreeing with most of it.

What a nice surprise it was to receive a copy of NZ Soccer's annual report in the mail. It's the first time I can recall the association putting together a document encompassing the year's financial returns, playing achievements, and comment on the game's various departments – and putting it out for public consumption.

This has been standard in other major codes for decades, but for soccer it is perhaps a sign we're returning to normalcy after years of shocking administration.

Indeed, I can only assume it was a nod in acknowledgement of the previous years of amateurism at head office under John Morton and Bob Patterson that the booklet took the liberty of listing NZS's achievements since 1999.

But on pouring over the report, one eagle-eyed Sitter! associate drew attention to a photo on page 5, which shows two junior players appearing to be tugging at each other's shirts in tussling for the ball.

Shirt-pulling is of course a bookable offence. "Curious behaviour for a national body to endorse, is it not?" my pal asked. (I mention this just to illustrate the fact there are far worse anoraks than me out there.)

The accounts show a financial recovery with a profit of \$99,000, the first trading profit for many years if you exclude the Confederations Cup prizemoney. And that is after sustaining an unbudgeted loss of \$159,000 (on top of the budgeted \$45,000) on the national league.

What interested me most was within the publication we got a women's report, a youth report, and a referees report. Indeed, everything except a specialist report from what you might have expected most: a men's report.

For that matter, there was no coaches report either. Which is a bit alarming. It would

have been nice to have seen a summary of their year's work as well. Particularly when you've lived through some of the flako coaching edicts around my federation.

Nevertheless, this annual report is heading in the right direction. However exactly how far it has to go can be gleaned from a comparison with the superb A4-sized, full colour, 72-page Soccer Australia annual report.

It gives a comprehensive breakdown of the club, country and league of all Aussie players plying their trade abroad, a complete update on all Australian appearances since year dot, final competition tables, attendances, results and team line-ups for all international matches, coach education programme summaries, and basically anything you could ask for, complete with overview.

Still, for all those worthy services, it should also be noted journalists weren't allowed access to Soccer Australia's AGM (just a post-AGM media conference). As any journo who has sat through the AGM of a national body, a media conference is no substitute for the real thing.

Another World Cup qualifying campaign has come and gone. That we have again failed to qualify should come as no surprise.

The "Elephant Rankings" at www.eleRankings.com -- a ranking system which makes far more sense than Fifa's mumbo jumbo bollocks -- at the time of writing ranked Australia (as high as No 8 six weeks ago) as the world's 20th best nation (versus Fifa's 46) and has Brazil as No 14 by contrast.

Like it or not, we are trapped next door to an emerging world power in Australia. Sure, they've gone 28 years without qualifying for the World Cup, but they are seldom out of the top 16 in the world at junior and youth level and managed to beat both France and Brazil at the Confederation Cup without their two best players (Kewell and Viduka) while we struggled to overcome the Cook Islands.

While we at least scored against Australia (more than France and Brazil managed) you'd have to say the overall outlook is bleak. This was the biggest winning margin Australia has ever managed in a home-and-away playoff. Take away the schoolboy errors (four goals by my count) and they'd still have beaten us. I hate to acknowledge it, but Australia played a far classier game. Worse, I got the distinct impression they had plenty in reserve, had they been pressed harder.

The thing about Australia is not that they are flash with loads of party pieces, it's just they do the simple things so well. And we don't have anyone of the class of Emerton or Okon, let alone Viduka and Kewell.

In the Listener Joseph Romanos (July 14) argued we have a "soft" qualifying section in Oceania, compared to the battles in Europe, where England and Germany are in the same group. He called it a "gift draw".

By contrast I'd argue we are discriminated against under the present structure. Every other confederation has an element of the unknown in it. For instance, England might draw any of a number of European countries in its qualifying group apart from Germany. And if it stuffs up, it gets a second crack through repechage playoffs for "next best" qualifiers. In other words, there are a multitude of options for countries in Europe to qualify, whether they are in the world's top 50 or out of it.

Same in South America. If Argentina stuffs up, never mind, it gets to play off against an antipodean nation as it's second bite. But in Oceania it comes down to beating Australia, with the winner then having to beat the fifth-best South American side (Brazil

at the time of writing).

How many European countries would qualify if they had to play off against Brazil? How many countries from the North American group would for that matter?

To be consistent, yes, we should have the playoff against South America's fifth-best if you want to globally indulge in cross-pollination of confederation abilities. But it should be our group runner-up contesting that series, not our winner. That would put us on a level playing field with other confederations.

Isn't it bloody frustrating to wait four years to get a decent run of internationals at home for the All Whites, and then find they have to be run at the most unsuitable time of day to accommodate the wanker Island nations?

I hope these same countries who successfully stopped night matches being played -- and stopped me seeing my team at North Harbour -- don't start complaining when there are fewer handouts and freebies than usual from Oceania because the tournament lost truckloads of money.

There was the normal media bollocks before the Wellington match -- that the Aussies were worried about All Whites being overly physical. The journos who start this stuff must have been locked away in a cupboard since 1981. The Aussies not only towered over most of our players, they also showed in Tahiti last year they are not averse to route 1 tactics and putting themselves about when they know they've got a dodgy Oceania ref. By contrast the All Whites (apart from Chris Jackson) can be almost genteel.

The 2001 All Whites were widely touted as our best side since 1981. I'd agree on paper, except Simon Elliott was far too deep to be truly effective with his playmaking for my money, while Mark Burton, Kingz player of the year, never got cracking after being under an injury cloud for the whole campaign. I was disappointed Ivan Vicelich didn't show up more, but at least Ryan Nelsen was all class at the back.

Romanos (again) was among those to take Ken Dugdale to task for stating the obvious (in my opinion) in observing the gulf was widening between Australia and New Zealand. Romanos pointed out All Whites had committed silly errors rather than been overwhelmed.

Well, yes. But notwithstanding the silly errors, there is also a growing gap. However prize for the most absurd suggestion for the widening of this gap has been that our failure to qualify can somehow be traced back to the demise of the national league in favour of three seasons of Superclub in the mid-90s.

This is truly bizarre, though to be fair, The Dominion's Russell Gray -- once the doyen of NZ soccer writers -- is the leading disciple of this tosh.

Important though it is as a showpiece for domestic soccer, the national league has never been less relevant to our international fortunes, as evidenced by the fact no players from it took the field in either match against Australia.

Since the advent of the Kingz, the swarm of young Kiwis now taking up scholarships in the US since 1995, the scouting networks of Australian clubs like Northern Spirit who are swooping on our schoolboys, and the number breaking into pro-football in the UK, the national league has not quite been the pillar it once was. We are now more part of soccer's global village than ever. I may be wrong, but I can't recall players like Ryan Nelsen, Mark Burton, or Aaran Lines ever having a significant presence in the national

league. Others like our "pro of the year" Ivan Vicelich came of age through the Superclub era. So did Danny Hay for that matter. Our Fifa ranking as we write is No 85. In 1992, before the superclub's brief reign, we were 98. I suppose the more obtuse could claim all sorts of things about superclub v national league, and the waxing and waning of our international fortunes on that basis. But not us.

I don't know about you, but Jason Batty's most uncelebrated gaffe in presenting Brett Emerton with a gimme goal at Wellington didn't surprise me in the slightest.

That's because I've seen Batty do the same thing twice before in the national league. Mark Cossey did it for Waikato United v North Shore (Allen Hill Stadium) in 1992 and Paul Nixon did it for the same club in the summer league in 1996 (Porritt Stadium).

I've always seen Batty as a good solid soccer citizen, a model pro. But if he has a problem, it is that he is a good 8-12 inches too short to be an effective keeper at top level (see Cordwainer Bull, this issue).

Over both qualifiers his biggest sin was not so much trying to chip Emerton, but that he was so often restricted to his goal line (rather than coming out and dominating his six yard box) exactly because of his lack of height. And you can't coach "height".

The other big "player" issue was whether Wynton Rufer should have been in the All Whites squad. Rufer never troubled the Aussies when he played against them in 1997, so I couldn't see what he was going to do four years later as a 38-year-old. He can still mask his lack of mobility at club level, but I couldn't imagine he would have added much in either Aussie match.

There is a sense of occasion in going to the Cake Tin. The long approach ramp reminded me of the Wembley Way, when I made my first pilgrimage for the Aussie match. But there is much that needs to be done to make it a fan-friendly venue. At \$25 a throw to get in (and an outrageous \$4.50 a plastic cup of Lion Red) you expect a few basics, let alone some trimmings.

The team lineups (numbers and names) were not announced before the match to the fans, and substitutes weren't announced until midway through the second half.

(I'd like to take some credit here – I complained at to one of the security gorillas at the replay screen end that nobody had announced the introduction of substitute Noah Hickey to the team after the half time break. "Ehore, can't you work out what colour he's playing in?" came the incredulous reply. I patiently explained to my new-found pal that people might like to know who the No 6 was who wasn't there when the teams trudged off at half time. Anyway, after insisting Andy van der Laan put out his cigar, he mumbled some pidgin English through his walkie talkie, and hey presto, we had sub announcements. Neat.)

Another observation: infantilism rules at the Cake Tin. You might be old enough to vote, to drink, to gamble, to join the army, but you are not to be trusted with seeing a replay of anything slightly controversial at Wellington Stadium.

Whenever something happened that you actually might be interested in seeing, we were treated to fatuous close-ups of the most moronic spectators the cameraman could find. I hate somebody sanitising reality for me, especially when I've paid more than I would if the match had been held at any other New Zealand venue.

Another complaint. There was no ground clock. The time was shown on the big screen, but then they removed that in the second half. No doubt it would have been

"controversial" if the ref had blown early.

My favourite "fan culture" moment of the match came when the hard core behind the goal at the northern end finally succeeded in getting an "All Whites, All Whites" chant reverberating around the ground when New Zealand made a mini-revival late in the first half. Wouldn't you know it, the northern travelling fans (including me) then immediately turned on their brethren and chanted "where were you when we were shit". You have to laugh, don't you?

As is my custom at internationals, I spent the pre-match selling Sitter! outside the ground. I put on my silly hat, sported my All White shirt, and puffed my chest out as if I was well ready for a stoush with security newts.

As it happened there was no problem, if you don't count the fact I can't recall ever having had such a cool reception for Sitter! (though it was neat Mark Burton's parents and Ivan Vicelich's dad bought copies). Certainly Sitter! is not for everybody (it even pisses me off sometimes) but I'd have to say the Wellington crowd were more resistant, close-minded and dare I say, frightened, to have a peek at the fanzine than any other soccer crowd I've sold at.

Was it just me? Well, the lovely Brenda sportingly decided to lend a hand, and found much the same thing, despite her cheery demeanour and come-to-bed smile. We sold 36 in 30 minutes, but frankly it wasn't worth it. I won't bother if there is a next time at Wellington. To be fair, the total Wellington experience wasn't too bad. Ever since Nick Hornby wrote *Fever Pitch*, it's become fashionable for fanzine writers to wallow to excess in the minutiae of their soccer adventures.

I won't bore you, apart from observing on the flight down to Wellington I stumbled across a journalist who was on a fully paid ACC junket (coming out of YOUR levies by the way) to attend a half-hour press conference after which she could catch up with all her mates, bummed a ride from the airport with a probation officer who could put the cost on his expense allowance, and hung out at the Backbencher with a mate from Land Information who was in Wellington for a week on the head office gravy train. Yes, Wellington is Junket City, with some nice pubs thrown in. (*Try the Forbidden Fruit beer at Leuven -- Beer Ed.*)

Sadly, after swapping lies with all and sundry at an aftermatch Centre Circle gathering at the Stadium, it was strangely deflating to find so few fellow-travellers ready to hit the town soccer style. (Are the All Whites' travelling hard core starting to show their age?) The much talked-about Courtenay Place was about as thrilling as a Shane Rufer sound bite, but at least we found suitable weirdness with winter solstice celebrations at Zebos. Fire swallowing, belly dancing and drum beating was every bit as exotic as Batty's goalkeeping. You really had to be there.

Speaking of weirdness, congratulations to Sitter! subscriber Eddy Kane for taking the Nutter Award of qualifying week. Kane posed for a press photo standing on a car, waving an Iranian fan -- a telling symbol of the blackest day in Aussie soccer history, when they stuffed up a 2-0 lead to miss out on the World Cup last time around.

Sitter! was pleased to play a role. The Evening Post contacted Sitter! deputy Grant Stantiall trying to tee up a pic of nutter northern fans, and Stan, quite rightly, told them to play up their own eccentrics, putting them onto Big Ed. Just two pieces of advice, Ed: how about buying yourself an All Whites shirt if you're going to big-note it in the media. And secondly, take good care of the flag. We don't want you becoming the Salman Rushdie of Brooklyn.

-- **Bruce Holloway**