



## A bad dose of Cup fever

This is something of a shaggy dog story about the Chatham Cup. It rambles on a bit, but bear with me, because it's worth it if you enjoy perversity and have a keen sense of the ridiculous in New Zealand soccer

Late last year us Sitter! anoraks decided it would be neat to enter the Chatham Cup. It would not only be an opportunity to indulge in a bit of fantasy football for ourselves, a few subscribers and invited guests, but would also help raise the profile of early Cup rounds and perhaps even prove a bit of a

charity-fest.

Shit, in exceptional circumstances we might even win our first round match, though with the usual suspects of fatties, nutters and psychos on board -- and the prospect of Derek "Boy Gorge" Walker in goal -- that was always highly unlikely.

We'd taken inspiration from those imbued with Cup Fever in earlier years. Scaffolders, Mad Hatters, Thomas Cook Red, and the marvellously named Tuck Inn Coffee Shop. If they could play, then what the hell, so could we.

We already knew it was tough to win the Chatham Cup. What we didn't realise was how difficult it was just to bloody enter. In the wake of our experiences, I'm now wondering whether having so many roadblocks actually serves the game or conspires against its best interests.

But I'm getting a head of myself. We dipped into our funds and bought team strip, balls, buckets bags, and a trenchcoat for the gaffer. This wasn't to be a Raggyarsed Rovers campaign. No sir, we would go out of the Cup in style.

On February 25 we despatched our entry fee cheque of \$168.75 to Noel Robinson at Soccer2, a good week ahead of the closing date. No point in taking unnecessary risks, is there?

But officialdom was lukewarm on our entry from the start. On March 12 we received a letter from NZ Soccer operations manager Alex Hayton declining our entry and explaining how they receive a number of applications every year for "makeshift" teams, which they decline because the Cup was designed for clubs affiliated to New Zealand Soccer who pay an annual affiliation fee.

"The appropriate course of action would be for Sitter! to affiliate to Force 3, transfer players in, pay the entry fee and compete in the competition like any other club."

It seemed a bit steep to fork out further money for what was likely to be a one-off. But showing the sort of cast-iron determination we figured would take us a long way in the Cup, we went the extra mile.

After securing sponsorship from CMG we stumped up with the \$450 to affiliate to Force 3 -- a sympathetic CEO Mike "Blocka" Thompson said he wouldn't charge us a extra \$7 a head registration because he understood we were more than likely only playing the one match -- and paid our dues on March 22.

In the 13 days between paying our affiliation fee and the Chatham Cup draw being released we had no contact from Force 3 or NZS.

So imagine our surprise when the first qualifying round of the draw was released and we weren't there.

Among the 136 entries there were nine schools, pub teams such as Dispensary Bar, the fabulous Melchester Rovers (hope Roy Race is playing lads) from Dunedin, and the New Zealand Celtic Supporters.

In earlier correspondence Hayton had warned us: *"As you are aware, the Chatham Cup is the sport's most prestigious trophy, with a long history and tradition. It is New Zealand Soccer's responsibility to maintain the integrity through appropriate regulation. To set a precedent may ultimately allow other non-affiliated teams to compete, potentially undermining the competition in the longer term."*

That statement was made before we attempted to affiliate, but it's worth analysing. What is it that gives the Cup its prestige? Apart from the historic stuff – Seacliff 1923 and all that -- I'd suggest it's the fact that there are enough teams nationally who want to have a crack at it.

But on this front, NZ Soccer may be shitting in its own nest by doing its darndest to keep teams out. The Cup has little prestige south of Hamilton if you look at the entry list. There were just 27 entries from the South Island and, as far as I could make out, 33 (excluding the three national league sides) from the Central region. Take away the schools and the pub teams and you could actually argue the competition is badly in need of a bit of life.

Indeed, the best Chatham Cup early-round publicity I can recall came on the Holmes Show the day before pub team Kings Arms Cosmos were due to face Central United. Over a pint and a game of darts at their local, these lads spoke of their limited soccer aspirations. This was nicely contrasted with some typically wooden Kiwi soundbytes from the Central players. (*Paul Urlovic: "I score goals. That's what I do".*)

But that's beside the point. Shit, we'd affiliated. Hadn't we?

Hayton later told me our entry was declined because we "didn't meet the criteria of what constituted a club". I actually wasn't able to find any such criteria in Chatham Cup regulations, and pressed him further on this issue.

He acknowledged we were the only team to be refused entry. (Ha! Sitter! is No 1 again.) He said our rejection was tied to Force 3's refusal to accept an application from a Tauranga club to affiliate. There was a concern our situation would be seen as "setting a precedent" in Force 3s efforts to stop the embryonic Western Bay United from becoming part of the soccer family.

This blew me away. If ever there was a better story than a bunch of hacks being refused entry to the Chatham Cup at a time when many "mainstream" clubs can't be stuffed, it was this.

For those of us who can recall the pre-Federation days when administrators tried to get people playing rather than stop them, this was an even bigger mystery.

The mystery was partially explained when it became apparent former Mt Maunganui godfather Dave Cook is the driving force behind Western Bay United.

Cook is the Arthur Daley of Tauranga soccer. He's besotted with the game, but has occasionally stretched the boundaries in his endeavours to make the game work at top level over the Kaimais.

I sought his views on what was going on.

"I know you'll stitch me up again, you bastard," Cook said, in his inimitable manner, before explaining NZ Soccer's appeals committee had recommended mediation on Force 3's move to disallow affiliation.

Okay, so none of us may be life members of the Dave Cook Fan Club, but I've yet to hear a good reason for giving this would-be club the cold shoulder. (Cue: thousands of letters from Sitter! subscribers.)

Cook argued his case reasonably eloquently.

"Western Bay has a very low number of people involved with the game compared to the numbers in Dunedin, Napier, Hamilton," he said. "I've carried out a study of the demographics of Western Bay and we are way behind other centres in the number of people involved in senior soccer. Western Bay has greater population than Hamilton, Dunedin or Napier. Even when you deduct the over 60s, it doesn't stack up soccer wise. Napier has twice as many football teams as WBOP.

"Dunedin has 63 senior men's teams and 25 Varsity teams. Hamilton has 38 teams and 24 businesshouse teams. We have 12 senior men's teams and three from Tauranga College. We have five clubs servicing 130,000 people.

"They said they didn't need us. But anybody who says they don't need the energy of people who love the game need to go away and have a bloody good think."

Cook said it had finally occurred to him – after 20 years of trying to make a go of the old Mt Maunganui club – that there was a need for more clubs.

"We'd advertise like crazy but we never had a strong base. The point is we need more people active, more people with the energy to get involved with the world game. The most natural income you get in soccer is through the gate from people in the game in your own back yard. People don't travel in droves from Hamilton or Rotorua. The only way you get more people is to get more senior players. But the federation is putting stumbling blocks in front of people. They won't allow us to affiliate.

As I write, Western Bay have taken the only option open, and joined Waikato's Businesshouse Sunday league third division – where they are leading the competition.

To be fair to NZ Soccer, they did offer us the chance to play "charity matches" before the cup final or other soccer occasions.

That's nice of them – I'm sure we'd have all the fascination of the bearded lady at the circus if we trot out for a curtainraiser before the World Cup playoffs – but the real issue is trying to be part of the mainstream rather than a sideshow.

Cup runs and the dreams they encourage are part of the essence of football for fans. Take away the dream element of soccer for the likes of ourselves and Western Bay and you strip the game back to its administrative bones, which is not a pretty sight.

Besides, at some time every fan is overcome by the sheer perversity of visions of our best clubs coming a cropper to non-entities in the Cup. The worse your status or performance in the league, the greater the potential glory in the Cup.

We have to cherish our child-like thoughts, dreams and expectations of success, and that is what the Cup does to you. The Cup is romantic, yet cruel. It's exciting, yet depressing. It can be glorious, yet humiliating.

I can only hope there is a parallel universe out there where the Chatham Cup is indeed open to everybody. Where instead of a miserable 136 national entries, there are 3000. Where every neighbourhood, every pub, school, bank, and worksite in the country puts out a team hankering for Cup fever. Where the first round of the Cup is a community social event celebrating New Zealand Soccer Day. Until that alien concept catches on in this universe, I'm thinking of starting a new knockout competition: The Unchatham Cup. At the moment it looks odds-on for a Sitter! FC-Western Bay United final at Albany on September 15. But you're all welcome to have a crack.

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What with Austraaalia winner the Oceania U20 qualifying series, it's easy to forget what a good showing the Youth All Whites made in beating them 2-1 at North Harbour on February 28.

It was a thriller to watch and excellent value for money. Australia was technically a far better side, but the Kiwis were extremely resilient and gutsy.

David Mulligan seems to have got smaller, not bigger, since the 1999 U17 campaign. David Rayner was again unflappable at the back while Darren Young was superb on the left of midfield. I can't recall having seen him play before, but he was a real find, especially with his curling free kicks.

Ben Sigmund has the makings of a very good player while up front Chris Killen was aggressive and last-minute find Shane Smeltz was well worth his place.

Only disappointment for me was Jeremy Christie. His work rate was poor, he appeared laboriously slow and his distribution was ordinary.

It's becoming something of a mantra that New Zealand teams play better with five in the midfield, and the injection of Wiremu Patrick into an enlarged midfield did help compensate for the struggling Christie. Jonathan Rowe (Dunedin) gets my vote for New Zealand international goal of the season (do we have such an award, Gav?) with his thunderbolt special into the top corner.

Finally a word about keeper Adam Highfield. He had an exceptional series, and can be added to the very good stock of Kiwi keepers we have at present.

The Bloc 5 influence was obvious in a hearteningly loud crowd, and while numbers were low compared to the U23s last time around, being part of a committed and active terrace more than made up for it. The New Zealanders were given a standing ovation at the end of the game as the shocked Australian side went off the park.

Incidentally, Sitter!, fearing there would again be no programme for a home international, produced possibly New Zealand's first "unofficial" 12-page match programme (if you have ever wondered why programmes find the need to describe

themselves as “official” , now you know) for the match. They were given away with Sitter! sales and contained songsheets for the night. As it happened NZ Soccer stumped up with a half-decent programme.

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Did soccer do the right thing in playing the U17 playoff against Australia as a curtainraiser to a national league match at Bill McKinlay Park? I'm not convinced. It's only two years since an Australian U17 team played in Auckland in front of just over 20,000 people (1999 Junior World Cup final).

By downgrading the occasion we are sending a subliminal message to fans that this is not really that important. But under lights, as a stand-alone event it might have been a half-decent event in its own right. Then again, the national league match could have been the curtainraiser to the international.

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If somebody had suggested to me two years ago that the New Zealand's top soccer club would be playing in a league where you play some teams four times and other teams two, where some clubs die halfway through a season (and where the league draw remains unchanged as a result), others get docked 16 points for having not paid their fees, where ethnic riots break out and players and coaches get assaulted, and clubs have no compunction about playing their youth team when it suits, I'd have argued it was bonkers to join.

And yet, here we are. Yes, it's been amateur night in the Australian National League. It has all the makings of a joke league. And that's not even getting into the argument over the validity of a “top 6 playoffs” for soccer, let alone why on earth they are working so hard to exclude clubs which have passed the stringent “going concern” test.

By contrast, brave attempts have been made to try and tidy up our own national league a little bit this winter, despite the impact of its sponsor going kaput. For starters, in line with our passionate arguments from last year, it is now officially called a national league (Qantas National League at last look) again.

Meanwhile it's been tremendous to see bonus points also quietly slip away unnoticed. For the record, the extra points awarded last year for scoring 4 goals or more in a match actually produced the lowest goals/game ratio -- 3.41 -- since the 1993 Superclub top 8 series and did not affect the order of the final table in any respect had bonus points not existed. Nor, it could be argued, did it add anything to match attendances. So there we have it: no greater crowds, no more goals, and no impact on the final table.

One of the most encouraging things about this season's national league has been the qualitative leap forward in the standard of the media kit for the QNL. It's normally at this time of year we lampoon the annual effort, but NZ Soccer have done a top job this year. It has a wealth of contact details, background information, and even mug shots of six members of every team. I think it's the best media guide since 1991. The next improvement would be to start listing the various league records and their holders (most away wins, highest goal aggregate, longest winning run etc). It would probably only take a phone call to soccer historian Barry Smith.

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You always leave yourself wide open when you have a ping at other members of the media -- and I'm probably fair game more than anybody -- but here goes anyway.

Two things really irritate me about Stephen Mclvor's hosting of "Soccer Central" -- a stupid name, incidentally -- for the Kingz season coverage on Sky.

Firstly, why can't he learn to pronounce Paul Urlovic's surname properly (it's pronounced "Urlovich, Steve"). He is a professional broadcaster. Does he not wonder why his commentators pronounce it differently to him? That's the thing about names, there is no inbetween. You either get them right or you get them wrong.

My second bitch is Mclvor's insistence on referring to Ericsson at "The Palace". What is it with television that it thinks it must impose silly nicknames on fans and viewers? As it happens the fans have their own silly nickname for the place -- Colditz -- as Mclvor well knows.

I've never heard anyone but Mclvor refer to Mt Smart as The Palace. Even his own commentary team know it sucks. It's about time Mclvor broke out of his little fantasy world and joined the, er, bigger fantasy world of the fans.

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On the subject of media getting it wrong, Listener sports columnist Joseph Romanos excelled himself in irritating almost every soccer fan I know with his obtuse comments on the game (and his mis-spelling of author Grant Stantiall) in his review of *Stand Up if You Love the Kingz* back in early March.

To this I'll add my 10 cents worth. Romanos noted "Stand Up" did not canvass the off-field shenanigans of the Kingz last season (as the authors also explained in the publication).

"This subject needed to be developed for Stand Up If You Love The Kingz to progress from a fanzine to a serious publication," he argued.

My bitch is I think that statement misrepresents fanzines. In actual fact the literary history of soccer shows that fanzines, rather than being lightweight cheerleader jobs, are soccer's most critical, savage, unforgiving publications. They are not part of soccer's establishment and are not up for freebies or junkets. They wear their emotions on their socks and rarely do a patsy job.

If there is any criticism of the review, it is that it was not fanzine-ish enough, and didn't tap terrace feeling a bit wider.

Fanzines are exactly for fans who want to do more than jump up and down behind the goal, who are tired of the shallow bell-tolling fatuous stuff they too regularly get served up in mainstream media. When it comes to the fine detail, in my experience fanzine writers win hands down, even if the analysis isn't always coherent.

Romanos also got it wrong in saying the attention given to Bloc 5 is unwarranted. Bloc 5 has brought about a renaissance in soccer supporting in New Zealand that is spreading far beyond the Kingz.

Sure, the Bloc 5 numbers aren't great by international standard -- a couple of

hundred loose-knit fans – but their influence is huge. Apart perhaps from a small pocket at Napier – fans in this country had lost their way since the late 70s. Now it's cool again to chant, sing, and bring humour to soccer sidelines. The very concept of accepting this role of making an unreserved attempt to lift your team, rather than relying on the team to lift the fans, represents a qualitative leap forward in our sideline culture. We're now seeing clubs all over the country encouraging formation of their own equivalent Blocs. All power to Bloc 5.

Incidentally, it was sobering to note Miles Davis' criticism of Bloc 5: that their support is too uncritical, that singing *"we'll support you ever more"* when they're playing crap is peurile. Has he got a point? I dunno. It just wouldn't seem the same chanting: *"We'll support you now and then when you do something good"*, would it?

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Full marks to Bill MacGowan and New Zealand Soccer for getting the national league sorted out so quickly after the nightmare of having their sponsor, Qantas NZ, go into receivership. (Incidentally, last year Sitter! was the only publication to point out what a dodgy proposition the former Ansett crowd were).

It is important the league survives, even if it is outrageously expensive to compete in (\$35,000 entry fee) in relation to the miserable attendances (an average of 400 a game, tops). It's sobering to note that last time soccer lost a major sponsor (Smokefree), both previous chief executives proved absolutely hopeless at drumming up anything. This time MacGowan plugged the gap – and we're talking at least \$150,000 here – in a matter of weeks.

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It was neat to see the launch of the "Small Whites" programme, for junior kids, promoting both coaching/skill programmes and player of the day awards. Drawing a link between the tens of thousands of juniors in New Zealand and our national team is a long-overdue move. Only one thing, thousands of promotional posters of Ryan Nelsen -- "expected new All Whites captain" by all accounts -- were dished out in conjunction with the promotion. obviously nobody told Ken Dugdale because, wouldn't you know it, Chris Zoricich is back as skipper.

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One of the most disappointing things about the demise of Melbourne club Carlton for me was the associated wind-up of Sally Orpin's excellent fanzine *My Blue Heaven*, which was always a top read. There was more than a touch of pathos about the cover of their last issue, "Not Drowning, Waving". It joins The Farr Post and, apparently, *Studs Up* in the fanzine graveyard. RIP. May Sitter! not join them for a while yet. ***Apologies to loyal subscribers for another frightfully late edition. Sadly this might be the pattern until the Hamilton Boys' High soccer season is over. – Bruce Holloway.***

