

Up front



Do-it-yourself soccer

We have this tendency in New Zealand soccer to “blame the authorities” when things don’t go our way.

In the same way that we might blame the ref when our team loses, we too readily slag off administrators when we don’t agree with policy decisions, rather than agitating around alternative models.

I should know because I’m one of the worst culprits.

Example 1: The national league is canned, so everyone has a pop at Bill MacGowan/John Morton/Harry Dods (this is a recurrent time warp thing, so you can choose your own historical reference here).

Example 2: Kevin Stratful sells us a lemon of a federation system and we criticise it like hell, but generally fail to try rebuilding something which better suits our geography.

The deeper problem in the game here is we too often lack any counterbalance, where people having the courage of their convictions to organise, agitate or educate around possible alternatives.

Sure, we have people forever doing “running repairs” in the game in the same way a farmer may fix things up with a bit of No 8 wire. But we have to get away from the mindset that “head office” are the only ones who can ever do anything.

It’s time we showed a little more independence and initiative. Those are the key words here. For example, if you feel “coach education” is going nowhere in your backyard (whatever happened to those great senior coaching conferences of the mid-90s?) organise your own provincial coaches association.

If you think All Whites fans are getting a rum deal with prices and seating arrangements at big tournaments, start an All Whites fan club (well overdue).

And if your club thinks its imperative there should be a national league this summer regardless of what NZ Soccer has decreed, get all the like-minded clubs around the country together and run one anyway. (There is nothing to stop clubs deciding who they play with/against and organising their own competitions -- it’s happened for years with preseason tournaments.)

Having a couple of years back bought into the philosophy that it was essential for the game to have a flagship league, it would surely be unthinkable for top clubs to now meekly follow the leader and abandon everything for the forthcoming summer. Well, wouldn’t it?

In the same manner that we too often spend way more energy on “how?” questions, rather than “why?” questions, too often we are also “waiting for Lefty” to fix things.

The biggest tragedy in New Zealand soccer is not bad decision-making at the top, but the depressing lack of vitality and initiative at the bottom.

I’ve seen this in my federation (Force Three), where I am convinced the apathy and inertia from clubs has been a key factor in the poor state of administrative affairs. Clubs have largely sat on the sidelines as the crisis-riven federation experiment has lurched along. For instance, only two Waikato northern league clubs were represented at the Force Three annual meeting (as is reported elsewhere in this issue).

But amid all this inertia it has been heartening to see the slow but sure emergence of Soccer Reform as a lobby group, formed initially to try and democratise federation

structures and challenge their worst excesses. I am not a member, but can see where they are coming from, and think it is a positive development. Have you ever noticed how few independent (non-NZS controlled) soccer bodies we have?

Soccer Reform are mite pissed off New Zealand Soccer won't accept or recognise their submissions on things like the national league, the Ineson Report etc, because they are not affiliates.

If I was them I wouldn't bother. I reckon they need to concentrate on disseminating their ideas to the grass roots rather than trying to get an audience with NZS chairman John Morris. We need to lift the quality (and quantity) of the debate about how the game is run in New Zealand *outside* of head office. And we urgently need to get back to the old-fashioned Kiwi do-it-yourself ethos at grass roots level.

NZS chief executive Bill MacGowan took exception to my editorial on the Ineson Report last issue. We hope to have a full interview with MacGowan next issue.

"So, how was France?" everybody has asked for the past two months.

I've developed a stock answer: "The All Whites were shit, but everything else was great."

Which isn't quite true of course, because tournament organisation was actually tragic for such a large event, and not a patch on Mexico. Us fans spent days at a time travelling vast distances to track down tickets that organisers had foolishly decided could not post out until days before kick-off.

And in a place like Paris you had to look hard for any sign of life of a major tournament was even on, so there was little sense of occasion in the city at large.

But otherwise, well, in a place like Paris you simply had to enjoy yourself, didn't you? Even with beer at the equivalent of \$8 a pint.

However back to the All Whites. They were a mess in every sense of the word. (So *exactly how many senses are there in mess? -- proof-reader.*) They spent most of their build-up and the tournament itself bickering about money. (At least the Black Caps and All Blacks were bright enough to have their pay/bonus disputes before an event – only soccer players would have theirs still going after the event).

Most of the All Whites played below their best and as a unit they played with astonishingly little purpose, even allowing for the fact they were up against quality teams.

The Confederations Cup offered the All Whites a rare chance to put themselves in the shop window and make a name for themselves. But we never really had a go. We didn't even scrub up as "gallant losers". The All Whites weren't up for it.

We were sterile, with our coaches seemingly frozen by the headlights in terms of formation (all NZ teams must play 4-3-3, remember) team line-ups or even substitutions.

Even the little things were wrong. Had we had the sense to take off key players when the Columbia match was effectively over -- on an aching hot night -- (rather than waiting till the last four minutes) we might have been in better shape for the game against France.

I agreed with **4-4-2** magazine, who gave this tactical summary of New Zealand:

Tactics consisted of passing the ball around the defence while the midfielders sprinted forward, then pumping it long and hoping for the best."

I left Mexico in 1999 re-invigorated by what I'd seen of the All Whites despite three losses. I left France convinced we've gone backwards.

In spite of that, Mick Waitt doesn't seem to be under any threat. At least it was refreshing to later hear him admit he had been naive with some of his selections.

But at the very least he needs a more alert No 2 as a sounding board. Either that, or he needs the travelling fans to get seats behind the bench to throw a few fresh ideas his way.

Later in this issue travelling fan Russell Duncan gives his player ratings. I agreed with most of them, but would add a few comments on particular players.

Ryan Nelsen was head and shoulders above all our other players. His distribution was excellent, the timing of his tackles superb, and the exactness of his technique a model for all defenders. He is our one player who was up to international class.

The All Whites were significantly stronger when captain Chris Zoricich wasn't playing. He never fitted in, despite being captain. He was an embarrassingly weak link. That's not surprising given how little he had played during the season, and his efforts were no surprise to fans, even if they were to the coaching staff. You can understand Duncan Oughton having a dressing room fit when he heard he was on the bench v France to accommodate an out-of-form captain.

For close on two years now everybody outside of the All White coaching team appear to have realised Nelsen is the obvious All Whites captain.

The true miracle of our qualification for France was that we got there by beating Aussie from a set play, but this is one of the worst areas of our game. Simon Elliott's free kicks and corners are woeful. Regularly they fail to get past the first defender.

If Ivan Vichelich is to play internationally, he really needs to do so as a defender, not a midfielder. He is one of our top 11 players, but he hasn't got the speed or work rate for the middle of the park.

Elliott and Vichelich both played as they do for their clubs, as defensive midfielders. What we needed was players offering a bit more going forward, where we never got any momentum. Playing in Poland has not developed Aaran Lines' game. But then we knew it wouldn't.

Mark Burton was struck in Kingz mode, forever giving the ball away. The horrible truth is Chris Killen is little more than an old fashioned English-style hunt-and-grunt targetman.

Indeed, we displayed a fundamental lack of ability up front. All other teams had tricky dribble wizards or ball players. We had Coveny, who was every bit as awkward (for us, not them) as he was in Mexico. Coveny has genuine pace, but he is technically the worst player in the squad, gives away far too much possession and struggles with his back to goal. He is the type of player we have to try to get away from with the All Whites.

If that sounds overly negative, I'm finding it hard to think of any player not selected who might have made a difference up front, though would like to have seen Chris Bouckenoghe and Shane Smeltz give greater opportunity.

Then there is Michael Utting. He was a total enigma. A lot of pundits have touted him as one of our few stars. I disagree.

He would often make a number of blinding saves late in matches (which always look good on replay) having made inexcusable gaffes early on. He's still our best keeper, but

he lacked consistency.

At this point I must confess I had secretly hoped Utts would go on a bender midway through the tournament. That's cruel and rides roughshod over the admirable efforts of a top bloke to rebuild his life.

But it's true. There was a camera crew in Paris working on their Portrait of an Alcoholic documentary. (Watch for Simon Milton to present his documentary of the making of a soccer documentary.) The fact is, there's nothing like a good scandal to breathe life into a sterile campaign. A life-affirming reminder perhaps that the game is played by real lads with the same basic passions as us, not just antiseptic, well-behaved family-values types whose only vice is being overly greedy on the money front. Still, the devil has always had the best tunes, and perhaps that's another editorial altogether

Barry Smith expresses some cogent ideas in the editorial of the excellent 2003 New Zealand Soccer Annual (see page 8 for details).

"Of 32 New Zealand players named in a squad to prepare for the OFC Nations Cup, only five came from the National League. The out of form Kingz provided a further seven players. The other 20 were picked largely sight unseen, on the basis of past performance or overseas reputation.

There is no argument about the selection of players like Ivan Vicelich, Ryan Nelsen and Simon Elliott who are involved with internationally renowned teams and who have shown an ability to compete at top level. But is it right that others get preference over locally based players simply because they have chosen to go off shore in pursuance of their football options? Somehow, there ought to be a trial process whereby players from non-league British clubs, lower-division European or USA College teams vie with home based players for a place in the national team. Through competition the strongest emerge."

Still, I expect everybody who reads Sitter! has bought their own copy by now. If you haven't, order one today.

I can't remember the source, but I read a fascinating little anecdote in one of the papers during the Confederation's Cup.

Arsenal gaffer Arsene Wenger was asked for an autograph by a youngster -- and the story reported how Arsene then asked the lad what position he played.

"Numero dix" the kid replied. (In France the playmaker is always the No 10.)

"Ah, you must always play with these then" Wenger told him, pointing to his eyes. His point was that to create space (rather than merely exploit it) required vision and soccer brainpower more than legs.

It was the dimension most lacking in the All Whites game. It spoke volumes of the New Zealand outlook to me when, in explaining the disparity between New Zealand and the rest, All Whites coach Mick Waitt said: "We're not close to matching the physical attributes of players from teams like France."

Well we wouldn't be so bloody tired if we weren't chasing the ball all the time from lack of technique, Mick. No, what we need it more players who can play with their eyes.

The best thing about France was the All Whites fans. I'd estimate numbers at about

400, about twice the number of US fans for anybody wanting to puff their chests out.

There were refreshingly few of us boring old farts, and truckloads in their teens and early 20s, who were far too smart to be sucked into Andy van der Laan's (erroneous) counter-cyclical travel theories on beating the rush (if travelling south, take the first train north, then turn back at the next station) back to the Paris nightlife after matches.

On a similar note, Simon Milton was a wonderful ambassador, chief rabble rouser and gonzo cameraman rolled into one. In Lyon we were interviewed by French television. I added nothing of substance apart from my exceptionally silly hat, but Milts, dressed in a New Zealand flag, eloquently explained the magnetism of such a tournament for fans who were too young to remember the 1982 "Coupe de Monde". He then organised the most vociferous support I've ever heard at an All White game for the Colombia match.

Fan of the year is the one category in soccer for which we have no annual award. (Should we institute one, Grant?) If we did, Milts would win hands down.

Incidentally the next time Sky or anybody else are putting a TV show together, they really should think about getting Simon Milton on the job, and doing it with a bit of flair, rather than hiring all those blokes who think they're comedians.

This winter's award for weirdest decision goes to New Zealand Under 22 Development "Head Coach" (why does everyone have to have this "head" prefix these days anyway?) Ricki Herbert for his brainstorm in appointing 17-year-old Stephen Old captain of his team that got trounced by Japan.

Okay, so Old is a promising lad (I personally like the look of him), but having just promoted him ahead of his age group, we all got the message. Was there really any sense in making him captain? Why not just let him find his feet, gain the respect of the other players at a higher level rather than throw him in the deep end?

"Steven is a player of tremendous maturity and understanding beyond his years," Herbert explained at the time. "His overall performance, attitude and understanding of the systems we are playing made him the ideal captain. His recent experience as captain of the National U17 squad further enhanced his position in the squad."

I asked some lads who played alongside him whether they agreed. They didn't consider Old a leader, natural or otherwise.

"So, what did your captain say to you when you were 3-0 down and under the cosh?" I asked. "Nothing". Apparently Old never says a word. He is retiring and shy. As you might expect of a 17-year-old.

There were plenty of other captaincy candidates in the tour party. I feel sorry for Old.

On the subject of Old, we should also note the following classic psycho-babble from technical director Paul Smalley: *"Internationally Steven has an array of individual physical and physiological qualities, which we would like to complement by giving him some continued international experience."*

If you've got a worse example of coach-speak bollocks, please forward it to us at the usual address.

We're in the process of overhauling our websites (a completely new one coming up with tons of great features. Meanwhile many thanks to contributors who have sent in articles. Many of these have been held over to the next issue, which hopefully will be out a lot quicker than this one. -- **Bruce Holloway**