

# Why I don't watch the Kingz

by Derek John Walker



In the four seasons the Football Kingz have been in existence I have seen them play live just three times.

I did not go to a single game the season just finished and only one the season before. When they were on Prime TV the season before last I watched more often than not, but in the season just gone - with them being shown exclusively on Sky - I saw them play only a handful of times.

So I'm hardly qualified to judge their merits or downfalls. But I'm going to. Because, when all said and done, I'd like to have a reason to at least feel guilty about not going to see them play.

So, why is it that someone like myself - a soccer nutcase who lives and breathes the game - doesn't get himself along to watch the best players playing the highest standard of football in the country enveloped by an atmosphere you won't find at any other soccer game in New Zealand.

Because they are not and it isn't. I get far more enjoyment getting along to Kiwitea Street or Bill McKinlay Park than I could ever get from watching the Kingz.

There are many reasons for this.

Firstly, the ground. The Kingz have consistently been far too optimistic about the size of crowd they will attract, and have consequently based themselves in stadia they struggle to fill 5 per cent of.

As a result, the ground - be it Ericsson or North Harbour - takes on the feel of a ghost-town. Despite the best efforts of the ever-dwindling Bloc 5 and their ilk, atmosphere is non-existent.

Secondly, if the people in power who make the decisions think I'll be prepared to pay \$20 to sit in said empty ground to watch said standard of football they mistake me for one of their own - that is, a clown.

I can think of any number of ways to get better value-for-money entertainment in Auckland, and yes, they are all legal.

Thirdly, the afore-mentioned playing standard. Frankly, it is poor. If this is as good a team comprised mainly of at-home New Zealanders as we can put on the field we do have some serious problems. A far better game of football can be seen at Kiwitea or Bill McKinlay.

Finally, and most importantly for me, the Football Kingz are not a Football Club. They are a collection of homeless nomads that have no heart, no soul, and therefore no sense of togetherness, which probably explains a lot of the on-field malaise. So what to do?

## Off the pitch

To begin with, setting their sights at a realistic level would help. Forget about playing at 30,000 capacity grounds, they are never going to be filled. Move to a ground that can hold 5000-10000 people. If that happens to be out of Auckland, so be it.

But find a ground and stay there. Develop the clubrooms into Kingz clubrooms, name it Kingz Stadium, do something to give it and the club a further sense of identity. And turn it into an intimidating fortress, in which the crowd are close to the action and if the crowd numbers are down for whatever reason, the place doesn't feel totally empty. *(And serve an injunction on Stephen Mclvor if he starts calling it "The Palace" – Ed)*

On the subject of identity, at the moment it is sadly lacking and has never been given due consideration. There have been positives in this department, with the club and its suppliers producing an excellent range of replica and supporters gear thus far.

The name, too, while many had initial reservations, has proved to be one that people here do now associate with a soccer team. That is good. But the soul of the club needs developing, and the best place to start is with the foundations.

I've heard nothing but complaints about the official supporters club, and the club themselves really do need to learn a thing or two about self-promotion. Some of the players are very marketable, so market them. I haven't finished with the management structure either; more on that later.

Something also needs to be done about the ticket price. I'm sure the reason the price of entry is so exorbitant is due primarily to the stadium rental.

Well, if the club were to move to a cheaper, smaller venue, there goes that problem out the window. I'd pay ten dollars to watch, I will not pay twenty, and I'm sure many others share my sentiments.

And forget the season ticket. Not too many will be keen at this stage to fork out a lump sum - no matter how reasonably the cost-per-game price works out at. Make it ten dollar flat entry, no

concessions, and children under 12 get in for five dollars.

With regard to the coaches, well, sure, after the season they've just had there are plenty of reasons why Dugdale and Jacobs should walk. But there are also reasons why they should not, and unfortunately the main one seems to be the question of who are the better options? Right now they are best for the job, let them have a season with the players they want and not those they inherited.

Finally on the personnel front, Chris Turner has made noises recently about getting out. Let's hope it happens soon. His transparency has been all too obvious for too long now. The Kingz need authoritative direction, not a puppet with its verbalisation on loop.

### **On the pitch**

I spoke earlier of foundations, and on the field it's time for the broom to sweep clean. To date, the Kingz have been a failure. And what or who have been the common denominators during this period?

There are players who have proved that they are obviously not the type or quality of footballer that can win your team games, week in, week out. Forget the high profile imports who have more often than not (dis)graced the pitch, I'm talking the likes of Perry, Jackson and, blasphemy perhaps, Ngata, who have been there since the club's inception (Jackson's spell off besides) and have struggled to consistently turn in the kind of performances that win games. They've had their chance, and not performed well enough. Out with them.

There are a couple of exceptions. Mark Burton has proved in the past that he is a player who can light up the game and do so for ninety minutes. It hasn't happened for the best part of two seasons

now - for all the criticisms of the Rufer regime they were the ones who knew how to get the best out of this undoubted talent - but we know what he is capable of.

He is also the one player still on contract for next season. Keep Burton, find out what makes him tick and build the team around him.

Michael Utting is another exception. All-White great Steve Sumner recently said that without Utting in goal the Kingz would have finished bottom in the season just finished, and it's hard to disagree.

The playing standard of the NSL is an altogether different problem. It is nowhere near as strong as we were led to believe before the Kingz inaugural season, and if anything has deteriorated since.

This is mainly due to the Australian player-drain that sees around a hundred (probably more) of their best players plying their trade overseas. But from a New Zealand perspective, surely this should work in our favour, making the NSL easier for the Kingz to prosper in? Apparently not, well at least not with the current personnel. The answer to that? Sign our best personnel.

Forget expensive luxuries like Donoso, Miyazawa - possibly the worst professional player I have ever seen - or Almendra, who for all his obvious skill on the ball is a decoration rather than an important cog in a successful team. Ask yourself, if he is that good a player, what is he doing playing at this level?

Coach Ken Dugdale took steps in the right direction last season, in signing the likes of James Pritchett, Steven Turner and Jeremy Christie. By the same token, allowing Ben Sigmund to become disillusioned enough to wander off is a solid step backwards. Was he a worse player than Donoso? I think not. But which one cost the most? Poor management, I'm afraid.

There are players in New Zealand

good enough to step up. The likes of Daniel Aliaga, Sanjay Singh and Miro Major have been knocking on the door - at least give them the chance to prove themselves one way or the other.

And don't forget the players who've slipped through the net due to shoddy Kingz scouting, Aaron Burgess and Brent Fisher being two of the best examples. Fisher in particular looks a great player in the making, as anyone watching him perform in the National League could testify. Again, why was he allowed to get away?

The Kingz have contributed positively to soccer here at times in the past, don't get me wrong. But now the problem seems to be that the solid, if not spectacular work done in the first two seasons has been well and truly undone by the last two seasons.

Situations such as the Petersen/Boutsianis affair, Kevin Fallon's appointment, poor signings and poor public relations have seen that good work well and truly eroded.

The Kingz need people like me, but you get the feeling they think that I should be there by right; I'm a soccer fan, so why don't I go and watch the Kingz? But it's not as simple as that, I'm afraid. I need a reason to go, a reason to want to go, and not just the fact that it's a game of soccer.

If I want that, Central United and East Auckland are better options right now. Lure me, entice me, tempt me. Make the Football Kingz impossible for me to resist. Put them in a ground with an atmosphere and a reasonable entry price. Put some players on the pitch to whet my appetite. And above all entertain me.

With the 5 year license given to the Football Kingz running out at the end of the coming season they have a lot of reasons to get things right on and off the pitch. But sadly, I can't see them doing it, can you?