

*We invited a cross section of soccer identities, Sitter! contributors, and subscribers to give their views on the best and worst of 2002 and their hopes for 2003 in...*

# How was it for you?

**Michael Utting (NZ's best keeper):**

**Highlights:** Going to work each day, being close to my family and watching my two nephews grow up. Gaining respect from my peers and the public after the way I have turned my life around and proven to myself and others that I have a lot to contribute.

**Lowlights:** Leaving friends that I had grown close to in South Africa to sort my life out. Losing to the Greeks (South Melbourne). Letting a goal in at training in shooting practice against JT (Jonathon Taylor). To make matters worse it was with his left foot that he beat me.

**Hopes for 2003:** To stay fit and achieve the standard of fitness I desire, top six with the Kingz, and most of all, to excel and be the best keeper at the Confederations Cup in France. All I know are achievable.

**Wombat (founding Sitter! contributor):**

**Highlights:** Playing soccer with a group of fun people from diverse ethnicities at the Auckland Domain. Nutmegging some guy and then dribbling past heaps more ala Maradona style. Finally scoring (a cracker of) a goal, for the first time in ages!

**Lowlights:** Indifferent form from the Kingz and the subsequent reduced patronage at the home games. Andy Vlahos losing his scoring touch. Spurs mid-table mediocrity, and Southampton's FA Cup loss.

**Hopes for 2003:** Kingz reach Top 6 play-offs, Tottenham qualify for Europe, I score another (wonder) goal.

**Phil Clayton (Chch Rangers fan):**

**Highlights:** The All Whites ONC win and subsequent moving up the FIFA rankings ahead of Aussie, Rangers winning the Rangers AFC Pre-Season Tournament and formation of National Women's and Youth Leagues.

**Lowlights:** Rangers losing to Rangiora in Chatham Cup, NZ losing to Fiji in U20s, Kingz finishing bottom of NSL.

**Hopes for 2003:** Kingz to scrape into NSL playoffs, a NZ win in a Confederations Cup match, Canterbury United make it to STNL playoffs.

### **Gordon Irving (TV commentator):**

**Highlights:** Qualification for the Confederations Cup. No matter that it was against a Socceroo team of dubious quality, it guarantees New Zealand Soccer a financial windfall to help promote the game in New Zealand and pits our best players against the best in the world. A chance to show the soccer world that we are competitive. A difficult task but one that New Zealand Soccer must grab. The junior numbers playing the game. Surely there are one or two top class performers out there in the system. Sky TVs coverage of soccer from all corners of the globe including New Zealand. The network should be applauded for recognising the interest in the game. Long may it continue.

**Lowlights:** Direct entry to the World Cup and the legacy it will leave. I don't believe this is deserved for a Confederation of the quality of Oceania. I also believe that the Australians are already light years ahead of us in the field of soccer development and this decision basically ensures Australian qualification for future World Cup finals. This in turn is a hand out worth millions of dollars injected into Australian soccer so that they can continue to develop and grow further apart from New Zealand. I wonder whether we will see New Zealand at the World Cup finals again in my lifetime. 1-6 on aggregate in the last World Cup qualifiers. 0-5 on aggregate in 1997. When was the last time we defeated Australia over two legs? 1981?? Our under 20 result prior to Christmas proved a point. New Zealand lost 1-0 to Fiji, while Australia then stepped up and beat the Fijians 11-0 a week or so later.

The performance of the Football Kingz in the NSL. Too many bad decisions both with regard to coaching appointments and players recruited resulted in the team and the code being laughed at by the Australian soccer public and the New Zealand soccer and non soccer public.

The continuing nonsense that is the FIFA Rankings list. For many years it discredited New Zealand Soccer by ranking the country too low and therefore hampering our chances of playing other countries. Now it ranks us too high. For New Zealand to be ranked ahead of Australia (albeit briefly) holds the whole system up for ridicule. They should scrap it.

**Hopes for 2003:** That the New Zealand soccer team steps up to the demands of international football and records a result at the Confederations Cup and no longer attends these competitions to make up the numbers. Three narrow losses are no longer acceptable. That the Football Kingz become a professionally run organisation and not as it appears at the moment to be "a seat of the pants one". I understand that finances are tight and unlikely to get better but I do believe there is no great long term plan in place for the club which restricts the chances of success on the field.

That New Zealand soccer can finally uncover a genuine top class footballer to follow in the footsteps of Wynton Rufer. While the Aussies continue to produce quality players, we have no players plying their trade at a genuinely big European club.

**Tony Smith (The Press):**

**Highlights:** Ryan Nelsen's winning goal for the All Whites in the Oceania Nations Cup final against Australia to book a berth in another Confederations Cup finals series, Fifa's decision to grant Oceania direct qualification status for future World Cup. The resurgence of a young Canterbury United STNL side, under the astute coaching of Danny Halligan and John Brown; and the appointment of Ken Dugdale as Kingz coach (Chris Turner finally gets something right). Non-NZ Highlight: Standing, singing and chanting in the North Stand at Christie Park, Morecambe as Morecambe thrashes Chester City in the FA Cup second round, and imagining my granddad doing exactly the same at another Morecambe ground over 80 years ago.

**Lowlights:** Kingz finishing bottom of the 2001-02 NSL and their disintegration under Kevin Fallon. The NZ under-20 team losing to Fiji in the Oceania play-offs... how did this happen? When will heads roll? Apart from my 11-year-old son's defection to the dark side — switching from soccer to rugby (nah, he can play anything he likes) — the Federation Six board's rigid insistence on persevering with the failed experiment of a Federation "premier" league when a full South Island League would improve playing standards in the Mainland.

**Hopes for 2003:** The Kingz to make the NSL top six, attract five-figure crowds in the play-offs, and fluke it into the grand final. The All Whites to qualify for post-pool play at the Confederations Cup in France and for T Smith to win Powerball and be in France for the Confeds Cup. Canterbury United wins the STNL grand final against Team Otago, 5-4 before a capacity crowd at Carisbrook. Danny Halligan heads the winner in the final minute of extra-time. Wishful Thinking: On the same day Bush and Saddam sign a permanent peace accord and both agree to accept binding recommendations from UN weapons inspectors, Federations Six and Seven achieve an equally unlikely equanimity and agree to reinstate a South Island league.

**Bruce Holloway:**

**Highlights:** Soccer matches of a standard worth charging at the gate for (All Stars v Dunfermline and Kingz v Melbourne Knights) returning to the Waikato after a long absence. The Napier Youth Tournament: the final between Central and Uni-Mt Wellington was a cracker and there were enough good players on show throughout to suggest that the NZ U20s failure in Fiji cannot be attributed to a lack of talent at this level. Centre Circle Waikato running a tidy provincial prizegiving at Waikato Stadium at just \$5 a head and still managing to make a profit. The World Cup: even the bad matches were good, weren't they?

**Lowlights:** My old Waikato Unicol club — which runs six men's teams — defaulting a northern league second division game. Extremely expensive, and inept federation admin in the Force Three region. Andy Vlahos -- Lammers in disguise.

**Hopes for 2003:** That soccer people become more inquisitive and question everything. That Sitter! continues to be cult reading and doesn't become too mainstream (it's not meant to be for everyone, you know.) That Stephen McIvor and Mark Elrick learn how to pronounce Paul Urlovic properly. Everyone else on TV can, so why can't they?

**Grant Stantiall (Sitter! Deputy editor):**

**Highlights:** New Zealand beating Australia in the ONC final. The fact that Australia didn't field their strongest side doesn't take away anything from the All Whites who were quite comfortable in their qualifying group, whereas the Australians struggled to impress and needed an injury time goal to make the final. The rise of New Zealand on FIFA's "ranking" system. The benefits of making the top 50 have already ensured NZS have an easier time in securing internationals.

The introduction of the women's national league. By moving away from a national tournament run over a week, this league now takes away an element of luck. It should also help the development and awareness of the women's game which is so popular worldwide.

**Lowlights:** Medial ligament injury which kept me out of indoor for nearly a year. I was pushing for a trial with the Kingz until then. Myself and David Cross in the Kingz defence would certainly bring in the crowds....just on entertainment value alone. The Under 20's result in Fiji. We didn't even make the final against Australia. The really disappointing thing was that Fiji rolled over in the first leg of and got absolutely bitch-slapped. The shonky state of football in Federation Three....the Waikato in particular. Some of the youngsters coming through are promising, but the pool of talented players in the region is poor. I'm pining for the national league days of Waikato United.

**Hopes for 2003:** The All Whites roll a team in France. We've qualified for two Confederations Cups now. It's time where just qualifying and making up the numbers is nothing to get excited about. We need a win against a major football playing nation.

A good tight STNL season that can be run without controversy. I'd like to see the provincial teams continue to improve and also for national league sides to focus more on building better club facilities rather than pay players good money. Good facilities should draw better crowds.

A united effort be made to ensure New Zealand has everything necessary to mount a serious campaign targeting Germany 2006. I'd like to see dialogue between supporters, administrators, sponsors and NZS as to what part we can all play or assist with to make things as easy as possible for the players to solely concentrate on qualifying as the Oceania representative for the next World Cup. Set targets over the next few years and build a fund to cover playing more internationals.

**Kingz Supporters Club Quiz Night**

**March 1, Lynn Avon Football Club**

**Kick off 7:30 sharp (final registrations from 7pm)**

**Prices:** Current supporters club members free if pre-registered, \$5 per person on the night, non members \$10.

**Teams** of 5 or 6, great prizes to be won (including a much sought-after Sitter! subscription) Pretty much all sports but not too heavily bent towards soccer

# **“You Like Smoke?”**

## **The trials and tribulations of the New Zealand U20s Qualifying Tournament in Fiji.**

**By Simon Milton**

Eight days in Fiji. Soaking up the sun, chatting poolside with foreign females, and watching international football. Sounds like hell on earth, huh? Let me clarify things further...

After putting a very convincing case to the relevant people that a cameraman was an integral part of any international football squad, I was surprised that they didn't agree and stump up the readies. Luckily, though, the Sitter! crowd are long time fans and disciples of Khalil Productions, and I was offered a generous donation that helped me record the events of Oceania Group 2 qualifying.

Utilising the net, I made bookings for some very reasonable accommodation in Suva, only to realise the night before I left that the tournament was on the other side of the island. A couple of panicky early morning phone calls later, and I was booked into Fawltly Towers Nadi. That is until I arrived, and my booking, made six hours earlier, could not be found. Fortunately, they had a space available in the wing that had no running water at the time...

A twilight stroll into Nadi in search of Indian food (and might I say that the goat vindaloo there was superb) allowed me to meet many of the locals - a great number of whom offered to sell me 'smoke'. After I declined politely, they became a lot less interested in my holiday plans, and the stop signs by the pedestrian crossings...

The New Zealand lads were staying at the slightly more up-market Tanoa International, and the team management could not have been more helpful.

The stadium was in Ba, over an hour north of Nadi, and so I was invited to travel on the squad's air-conditioned coach each match day. Players and coaches were willingly available for pre-arranged interviews, and the hotel staff just assumed I was actually staying there when I ordered drinks poolside...

Touring is always a taxing process, especially when athletes are expected to perform in extreme conditions. That said, there is something special about representing your country abroad, especially when the potential prizes are so



**MILTON: Not much to smile about in Fiji**

great.

Therefore, I was surprised to hear murmurings soon after I arrived, with some players sick of their hotel, and Fiji, and desperate to get home - before a game had been played.

Team spirit was hampered by the hotel management, who had managed to place the two halves of the squad at opposite ends of the complex, and boredom was a major problem. Many of the players did not seem prepared to rest as is needed in a tournament set-up, and there were a number of teenage Australian netball teams staying in the hotel that same week, which proved something of a distraction...

Perhaps I should have taken them on a field trip to my palatial lodgings. With the water now running again, the utility roulette wheel spun to the power supply. For a backpackers' with no air-conditioning, the loss of our dorm's single rotor-fan was keenly felt. Even the option of cooling off in the pool was temporarily unavailable as the chlorinator shat itself.

Luckily, Gelda from Illinois was staying there too. Her regular, high pitched proclamations of how much better things were at home meant the hours just sped by...

Thus, match days were a blessed relief for all concerned. The playing conditions were not just tough, they were medically dangerous, and the sooner the officials at Oceania stop playing their silly political games, and start thinking about player welfare, the better.

Our guys knew it must be bad when the team from New Caledonia complained it was too hot. Captain Peter Howe summed up the dilemma when he said there was no way to cool down. The air you were breathing in was 38 degrees hot, and any fluid you took in was lost almost instantly - either through sweat, or the explosive, fluorescent

orange diarrhoea that afflicted several of the squad...

By now, everyone is well aware of the team's results. Two convincing wins, one narrow escape, and one heart-wrenching, stomach-churning, bowel-loosening loss.

The opening 8-0 win over New Caledonia was impressive and clinical, with Mitch Brydon's four goal haul the highlight. Samoa gave us a hell of a scare, and it wasn't until late in the second half that the win was secured. Tonga were hardly a test, and things got pretty ragged, despite scoring seven goals.

Fiji were physical, and committed, but we only needed a draw to progress to the playoffs, never mind a win...

Let me make this perfectly clear. In terms of individual ability, New Zealand was by far the best team in the group. Their facilities were the best available, and they were more experienced than their opponents. In players like Morgan McCarrison, Andy Boyens, Glen Moss and Nathan Strom, they had guys willing to sweat blood for the cause.

Injury had robbed Brent Fisher of his fitness and sharpness, and yet he still showed flashes of his ability. The squad was run by two of New Zealand's young, up and coming coaches, and they had been working with these players for a fair length of time.

But something was missing, and I'm afraid I can't put my finger on what it was. Desire maybe, or commitment? A little bit of taking things for granted, or an undercurrent of Tall Poppies syndrome? Would Christie and Pearce have made a big difference, or some of the other guys from the US College system? I don't have the answer. All I know is that, although I was completely gutted after the Fiji loss, it did not compare to what the team was feeling, with the very

**Cont P40**