

## Up front



with  
**Bruce  
Holloway**

## Soccer on-line: the new religion?

About 100 years ago the father of modern sociology, Emile Durkheim, wrote an incisive work called *The Elementary Form of the Religious Life*.

His complex explanation of the religion of Australian Aborigines would be lost on most of you (apart from Wombat, of course) but I think his concept of a "church" is fundamental to understanding concepts of mass soccer culture, and provides a useful introduction to recognising where we might be headed in the internet era.

To Durkheim, a church is a shared feeling of special kind, typified by a group dynamic where the act of assembling for a common purpose creates the feeling of being in the presence of spirit that is greater than the individual.

He goes on to term this good feeling "sacred", before drifting into realms of deep theology which are beyond our brief. But what should interest soccer fans is the key idea of a common passion generating mass emotion which energises all of its participants.

For example, a wildly chanting, cheering Bloc 5 can be seen as a form of "church". It is a transcendent community where through "being there" every member can feel personally increased while contributing to the common cause, even if the Kingz are playing like dogs. A healthy Ericsson terrace can generate spiritual energy not unlike that of a revival meeting.

These days religion and "church" are not the social glue they once were in New Zealand society, but the concept of wanting to belong to something with other people remains as potent a force as ever.

The void left by social fragmentation of church, communal workplace and the multi-generational family is today increasingly being filled by internet "chat groups" – such as New Zealand's Goalnet Mailing List – which offer a similar sense of community. When soccer people get together on-line there is feeling of a larger "us" out there.

You gain some satisfaction and "sense of belonging" from the knowledge that you belong to a group or community that cares about soccer issues. You become part of a never-ending story (which is of course all part of the internet addiction).

Soccer, as a form of entertainment, speaks directly to the emotions, and when you are on-line, you not only digest information as you would in the normal course of assimilating any media, but find you can answer back or embellish data presented with your own thoughts and questions.

I mention all, this because while I see the internet as the medium most likely to give New Zealand soccer its next qualitative leap forward (as opposed to, say, Sitter!) in terms of informing, agitating and organising its followers, I am worried that the growth of our cyber soccer community has recently become inexplicably stunted.

There are well over 50 Kiwi sites dedicated to soccer in New Zealand. However while these provide worthy outlets for soccer nuts to get their message across to a mass audience without having to subject themselves to the whims of bored journalists or available space in advertiser-driven newspapers, on the whole they don't react well to breaking news and carry few of the strong opinions the internet is famed for.

Worse, there has been little sign of growth in terms of our premier interactive internet forum, Goalnet, (though the Kingz mailing list is also important) over the past year.

This is my main concern. For the benefit of the uninitiated, Goalnet postings (you can join for free by typing [goalnet-subscribe@topica.com](mailto:goalnet-subscribe@topica.com) into an email and sending it) are instantaneously sent by email to everyone who belongs to the mailing list. Somebody posts their thoughts on everything from the Miramar-Manawatu game to Kevin Fallon's programme columns. Others respond, disagreeing or endorsing, and from the synthesis of collective ferment you end up learning much more than if you relied upon a daily paper.

But for a while now I've felt like the Goalnet "church" has been marking time. Though there are a couple of hundred subscribers, it's only the same old 20-odd (and odd is sometime the operative word) who dominate the sermons.

A recent industry bulletin suggested something like 60 per cent of the New Zealand population had access to the internet at work or at home. That's a lot of soccer fans.

But at a time when there should be exponential growth all I keep seeing are the same old people posting, and the whole thing lacks critical mass. There is a serious shortage of fan input in relation to the numbers who are on-line.

To be fair, there are a lot of "sleepers" who belong to the Goalnet list who don't want to reveal their presence. (It is not impossible to find out who they are, but it's best just to respect that they wish to remain anonymous.)

This is my fifth year as a subscriber to Goalnet. I've found it to be the single most essential site for learning about what is going on in New Zealand soccer and hearing a cross-section of grass-roots opinion on those happenings.

Unsure of a kick-off time that the local media have overlooked? Want to double check with somebody at the game that it was so-and-so who missed the penalty? Want to share your frustration over administrative hassles with others? Try Goalnet for all of these.

Problem is, while there are strong pockets of mailing list members in Wellington, Christchurch, Manawatu and Hamilton, and Napier and Central United are represented, as far as I know there is nobody with strong links to University-Mt Wellington, North Shore, Waitakere or Tauranga City on the list.

It means we are missing out as a collective body on too-large a chunk of our domestic soccer life at present, when for next to no cost we could be so much more fulfilled.

Media studies guru Marshall McLuhan once noted we tend to look at new technology through a "rearview mirror" in trying to figure out what they will be like in the future by looking through the lens of existing media. Nevertheless, my guess is mailing lists will eventually supercede papers and radio as the media from which soccer fans most rely on for their information. They are a perfect vehicle for providing an audience with an avenue for more and deeper involvement.

So rather than go on a subscription drive for Sitter!, I'd encourage people to get onto Goalnet and add to the fabric of our soccer culture there. Your fellow soccer fans need you. And you'll enjoy it.

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It was fascinating to read a recent Listener article on the explosion of growth in junior soccer (*The Beautiful Game*, January 26), which is now, according to an increasing

number of sources, New Zealand's No 1 sport.

I'd suspected as much for many years, but never had the empirical data to prove it, apart perhaps from the Thursday draws page in my local paper.

But what was more intriguing than the conclusion was the presentation of evidence itself. Somehow soccer officials could quantify growth rates for the writer, citing federation managers' reports of a 20-30 per cent increase, but not the actual numbers of junior players on their books.

"SNZ has no record of junior numbers, crowd numbers for All-White games are unavailable and the rate of the 'huge growth' in women's football is unregistered" according to author Alistair Bone.

So, despite the feelgood factor tied up with soccer growth, is this not perhaps an accompanying sign that we have also gone backwards in administrative processes since the advent of Federations?

I emailed new NZ Soccer media liason manager Andrew Dewhurst asking if he, for someone, could either quote junior statistics and crowd numbers or confirm they weren't available. Eight days later, when this issue went to press, no reply had been received.

But I do know the old New Zealand Junior FA used to publish the official registered figures in their annual reports. It was no secret. And crowd numbers would surely be the bread and butter of soccer book keeping at international level.

As for the women's figures, well, bet they would have known that if they hadn't disbanded the women's committee.

It's interesting to note the 1994 review committee report *A Proposed New Structure For Soccer New Zealand* stated: "*proper planning requires an accurate database of all membership to monitor trends and results of initiatives. If the NZFA is to undertake short, medium and long-range planning, it must be able to accurately assess the consequences. It is in our opinion clear proof of the lack of planning that has existed to date within our code that no serious attempt has been made to construct a national database.*"

Despite the estimated junior explosion, perhaps there are other spheres where we haven't grown very much in the last eight years at all.

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If we now accept that soccer is Kiwi mega-sport, with monster numbers playing, what then should we make of our efforts in the Oceania U16 tournament, where we finished fourth (you heard me, fourth)?

I can't recall such a poor effort at an Oceania competition ever. Beaten by Vanuatu in group play, we lost to Australia in the semis and Solomon Islands 5-0 in the playoff for third. Oh dear.

There was always major uncertainty over our participation in this tournament, so preparation was less than ideal. Ken Dugdale tells me it wasn't lack of money, but just the fact they didn't feel they were ready for it in terms of player identification or processes they were working through with their squad in this age group. At Oceania's behest a squad was rounded up at short notice and shipped off the Sydney.

All the same, it is disturbing to see lack of fitness advanced as a reason for our failure to perform. Fitness has been a traditional Kiwi strength (or a key component of our "gallant loser syndrome" if you prefer) and something we usually have no problem with... We might not be as skillful as other teams, but, hey, we can always battle right

to the end.

But here's an excerpt from an NZPA report quoting Dugdale, after the semi loss to Aussie. *"Fitness told in the end. After making the Aussies look ordinary with their best spell of the tournament, we conceded four goals in 15 minutes as our comparative lack of conditioning told."*

Fitness or no fitness, Weekly Soccer Observer (internet) editor Colin Chin was among those alarmed that smaller island nations should be tanking us, calling the losses a wake-up call for our practices at junior level.

*"OK, one loss is okay (to maybe Australia), but to lose almost successive games to both Vanuatu and the Solomons at U16 level has to raise questions,"* he wrote. *"The fact that our top national coaches have been humiliated in this manner means we have to now question what we are doing."*

Chin, one of New Zealand's keenest followers of junior soccer, mulled whether the coaches should "suffer the consequences" and how effective our academy structure is. He concluded Dugdale and Waitt were probably the right coaches to take the team, but at the time strongly questioned whether national academy structures were doing any good at all.

Dugdale's response was that it is far too early to judge the merit of the academy. He urges patience, suggesting it's not until the current crop of 13s have been in the system for five years that we should pass judgement.

I'd be interested to hear the views of readers who are.

Meanwhile, talking of Dugdale, I was impressed to hear him in the comments seat for the Kingz-Sydney United (0-3) fiasco at Ericsson. His analysis of the match, in conjunction with commentator Andrew Dewhurst, was far more perceptive than anything on television.

Aside from anything else, I like the idea of being able to listen to the All Whites coach assessing players, getting an insight into how he thinks, and what he sees when he's watching the same game as me. In terms of providing a public face for soccer fans, I reckon it's brilliant. Indeed, the future All White coach job description should be re-written to include: "must do at least five Kingz matches in the comments seat".

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Take a bow New Zealand Soccer for getting the national youth (U20 in name, but U19 in practice) summer league up and running. At the time of writing I've watched two matches and thoroughly enjoyed both. This is the best national youth competition ever, easily outstripping the National Youth Cup which was abandoned in the early 90s.

There is a team from every federation plus the New Zealand 16s academy team (though in all publicity, including that generated from NZ Soccer, they are referred to as the U17s) playing each other once in conjunction with the first half of the national league season.

It has been hard for some federations to work with their squads given their unforgiving geography -- you try running a team of youngsters where you're cobbling together players from Invercargill and Dunedin, or in the case of my local Force 3 outfit, players from Tauranga, Rotorua, Taupo and Hamilton. Nightmare, particularly when it's two hours to training, and two hours home again afterwards on a midweek night.

In the circumstances, the players on show aren't necessarily the best players, just those who can fit in such a schedule around other commitments in their life.

If there is a disappointment with the youth league, it is that matches are being kept

within the loop of existing national league geography, and not being taken to other centres (apart from one jaunt to Masterton).

For example, Force 3 have nine Hamilton players in their squad, but no plans to play any matches in Hamilton, a vast catchment area for soccer which does not see national league action. And what about other centres such as New Plymouth, Gisborne, New Plymouth, Whangarei, Nelson? Imagine what a boost to some of these places it might be to host a national youth league match, considering they don't get to see the senior national league.

For a transtasman example of soccer matches being given a "missionary" or civilising role, the NSL fixture between Melbourne Knights and Perth Glory was shifted to York Park, Hobart in a first for Tasmania.

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Despite having conceded more goals than a great big goal-conceding thing, I've been highly impressed by the development of Michael Theoklitos (or Klitoris as he is lovingly known on the terraces) in the Kingz goal this season.

For those that missed it, the deep irony here is I am the very same person who 18 months ago complained long and hard about Julio Cuello and how goalkeeper is the one position where we should never be using imports – that we can more than match it with our homegrown products in this department.

Well, there's an exception to every rule. Klitoris has earned his spot. By contrast, James Bannatyne (currently out with a broken leg) from Wellington looked dodgy on the two occasions I saw him.

But the larger question here is whether Klitoris – having nicely established himself – will be around again next season, or will return to Australia. That of course, is another perennial risk with imports.

Klitoris aside, I'm struggling to find anything positive to say about the Kingz. Despite the arrival of Fallon – or some would argue, because of it – they are as enigmatic as ever. I thought they played some brilliant stuff in their 0-1 away loss to Perth, who appeal as the best team in the league for my money.

But their later performance at home to Sydney United was worse than anything I saw under the Rufers, and the equal of the 2-7 loss to Perth under Mike Petersen.

Throw in a record low home gate, the Con Boutsianis shambles, Che Bunce taking them to a tribunal hearing for being axed, uncertainty over future NSL restructuring, fans increasingly calling for Fallon to be sacked (not me though) and we have our only professional club in one hell of a mess.

The calls have already begun for Fallon's sacking. They're understandable, considering he has not managed to improve performances on a consistent basis. But it would be stupid, even by Kingz standards, to get somebody else in for the final few weeks of the season.

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I've long been both a fascinated observer and occasional participant in the politics of intrigue in soccer in New Zealand.

We all have our moments. But honestly, we've got nothing on the clowns across the Tasman, where hardly a week goes by without somebody declaring the end is nigh, imminent league or club collapses, rebel leagues and breakaway political factions.

It's hard to know what to take seriously and what to dismiss, but the latest suggestion -- of an elite National Soccer League running in parallel with the existing

competition – indicates how sick things are getting.

Soccer Australia want to drastically reform the near-bankrupt NSL with the axing of yet more clubs for the 2002-03 season. At the same time there is an impasse between Soccer Australia and its estranged marketing partner, IEC. Threatened litigation by five “ethnic” clubs, working as a bloc, and the watertight marketing contract with IEC, has forced Soccer Australia to explore the possibility of running a parallel competition. The new league would be an eight or 10-team competition and would include cashed-up teams like Perth Glory and Newcastle United - and a host of newfranchises.

Running a parallel competition would apparently allow Soccer Australia to avoid an expensive legal battle, which is important, considering it spent almost \$1 million in legal fees last financial year. The elite-league option has emerged in an environment where an increasing number of sources can be believed, many NSL clubs are managing on a month-to-month basis.

For instance, Sydney United sold star striker Ante Milicic to rival Olympic Sharks for \$100,000 to help stay afloat for the rest of the season, while South Melbourne, Marconi and Adelaide City are also struggling.

The problem is exactly the same as in New Zealand. The competition is far too expensive to run compared with what it pulls from gate receipts. But it's the old national league conundrum: soccer can't afford the league, and it can't afford not to have it.

The chops and changes we've seen in New Zealand since 1992 illustrate how hard it is to find a competition model which is financially sustainable and at the same time enjoys credibility as a genuine elite national competition.

Like us, they'll struggle to find an easy consensus. Expect a lot more anguish and name-calling from across the Tasman over the next 12 months. Any bets on a delayed competition next summer?

Meanwhile I've got to say I'm glad our national league is back in summer. I'm keen on the national league, but because I only live in New Zealand's fourth biggest city (where there are no matches) I am largely disenfranchised as a fan these days. As a result I only saw three national league matches in the two previous seasons of winter, but expect to see at least 10 this season.

In October 1995 I put together an (unpublished) 52-page manuscript on the twists and turns and conflicting ideas regarding our national league from 1990-95, *The Fall and Rise of the National League*. It's an amazing potted chronology of almost frightening structural and ideological fluctuations from year to year.

Indeed, it's such a ripper in light of subsequent developments, I'm planning to update it by adding data from the equally turbulent 1995-2001 period and publishing it sometime later this year.

If the prevailing certainty of club administrators in 1991 that summer soccer was not what was wanted looked dated when compared to the unholy scramble for summer league places in 1995, it is almost mind-boggling to think that since then we have variously abandoned a national summer league in favour of North Island and South Island leagues three seasons later, then returned to two seasons of winter league, only to rediscover summer at the end of 2001.

If this was a work of fiction it would be dismissed as being far too improbable. Anyway, this is a roundabout way of explaining that if the gaps between issues seem abnormally long this year, rest assured time is being injected into another soccer publication you also wouldn't want to miss. – **Bruce Holloway**.

## KEEPING IN TOUCH

NZ Soccer chairman Kevin Stratful has been axed as Telecom's group general manager of sales and services. Forget all the puffery about new management structures, blah blah, our spies tell us Kev unveiled a radical new plan to divide the country into seven Telecom federations, based on area codes (United Telecom 09, Force 07, Central Dialling 06, Capital Cellphones 04, Southern Mess 03 etc). A totally perplexed Telecom CEO chief executive Theresa Gattung had no option really.



## Soccer ratings

The annual National Business Review-Compaq sports poll has found the public's interest in soccer is "of great interest" to 10 per cent of us.

Soccer, included in the poll for the first time, was "fairly interesting" to 30 per cent. Interest is highest in Auckland, where 15 per cent of people say they are very interested in soccer.

Soccer ranked as the sixth most interesting sport in the poll. That's not a bad result considering the Kingz are such shockers at the moment, we rarely get to see the All Whites, national league results never make the tele, and there is a dearth of high-profile personalities in the sport who don't sound like morons on camera.

For the record, overall, most sports are gaining more fans every year, with interest in rugby and cricket at its highest level since the poll was first taken in 1993.

Netball also has more fans than in previous polls in 1997-1999, although it has not been included in the poll every year. But rugby comfortably retains its "national sport" claim with 76 per cent saying they were fairly interested or very interested in it, up from 74 per cent when the question was asked a year earlier. The NBR-Compaq poll was taken in the four days to February 3.

**Total interest in sports (January 2002): Rugby 76%, Cricket 70%, Netball 70%, Rugby League 51%, Golf 47%, SOCCER 40%, Bowls 22%**

**FUTCHER SHOCK:** Jason Batty has left Nationwide Conference strugglers Stalybridge Celtic to be replaced by, er, a Fish. Batty decided to return to New Zealand after apparently becoming homesick. Said manager Paul Fletcher: "There was not a hint from Jason. It came as a complete shock when I received the message from Jason as there has been no indication that he wanted to return home. He had done well for us since he arrived. I'm disappointed, but I have David Fish, another good 'keeper I can call upon." Fish is no relation to Billy.

## Our history

***Because a comprehensive history of New Zealand soccer has never been compiled, those interested in our past are indebted to the efforts of veteran contributor Don Service for his unique recollections about the game from years gone by. In his latest offering, he recalls life at Auckland's long-deceased...***

# Blanford Park

Although Newmarket Park, the headquarters of Auckland soccer from 1964-1979, is still there as a public Park of the lawns and trees variety, not a trace remains of Blandford Park, it's predecessor.

With several roads developed in that area as part of the motorway system through Grafton gully, it's hard to pinpoint the exact site now, but the large carpark for University students approximates it, and one can get a bearing by looking up the steep bank to the big stone church of St Pauls with its frontage on Symonds Street, and remembering that the park was in the gully below it.

The main entrance was on Grafton Road, but that central part of this road was obliterated, although the upper and lower parts still exist. Across the road was the Auckland Bowling Club, and just a bit further away the Stanley Street tennis courts and the old entrance to the back of the terraces at Carlaw Park.

And up the hill at the Auckland Domain were four or five soccer grounds heavily used by lower grades every Saturday.

From Queen Street you could walk up Wellesley Street East, past Seddon Memorial Technical College, who

sometimes used the park for their annual athletic sports, past the Wynyard Arms Hotel (renamed the Kiwi in the 1950's) across Symonds Street to go down Wynyard Street along the side of the church to a right of way with steps doing down to the park.

The wooden grandstand, with about twelve rows, licensed by the City Council to hold 684, backed onto Grafton Road. It was a peculiarity of the afternoon light that usually in photos only the front half of the crowd in the stand were seen, the back half were obscured by the shadows.

From one side of the stand six or seven rows of wooden seating stretched up to the main entrance, and then around and along the full length of the goal-line at what was called the Stanley Street End, as opposed to the Grafton Bridge End. This open seating accommodated about 1400 people.

Opposite the stand was a fair-sized grass slope below the church. When I first saw the park in 1940 there were just three grass-topped terraces at the bottom of the slope, yet pictures from 1925 and 1926 show 12-15 rows of terraces there. When or why these terraces were removed seems a bit of a mystery.

A very modest place compared to



Ericsson or North Harbour. And yet it offered far more seating than the four or five leading Auckland clubs of today, some of which still have no grandstand. And you had a reliable programme every week of a main attraction with the next best attraction as a curtainraiser.

And clubs, not so obsessed as nowadays with home and away concepts, sometimes complained if they weren't chosen often enough for headquarters!

The park was named after Mr Morgan Blandford, the original owner of the land. It was officially opened on May 9th, 1925 when Auckland beat Waikato (*Damn -- Ed*) before a crowd of 5-6000. It was supposed to have been opened by the Governor General, but he was detained in Wellington by the fatal illness of the prime minister, Mr Massey.

The park had a fair playing surface in later years, but in the 20s and early 30s it was notoriously muddy after rain. Yet old-timers used to claim that Auckland's standard was better then than post-war.

This view was shared by Fred Fullbrook, a long-serving administrator, who with his carrying voice, was often heard reminiscing with friends in front of the kiosk. He thought highly of players such as Danny Jones, apparently a very skilled ball-player, Bob Innes, the best of the Kiwis, Jimmy Christie, Murray Kay and Alan Reid. The last two had Scottish professional experience.

A goalkeeper who was something of a legend with Aucklanders was Bill Zuill, but

his career was cut short by injury during the New Zealand tour of Australia in 1933.

Another noted keeper was Jack Batty, grandfather of Jason Batty, who used to tell how when he transferred to Tramways during the depression he was immediately given the job on the trams although they had a waiting list of 1300.

Admission prices were low. I think it was in the early 50s that administrators of the three football codes met in solemn conclave and decided that because of increasing expenses they would have to raise the price of admission for club

matches from one shilling to one and sixpence, the equivalent to raising it from 10 cents to 15 cents.

Strangely, in the park's 39 years, only two test matches were played there, Australia winning 4-1 in 1939 and 8-1 in 1948. Plus one "unofficial test" when FC

Basel (Switzerland) won 4-1 under floodlights in 1964.

This was because for many major attractions bigger grounds were hired, Eden Park just a couple of times and the Epsom Showgrounds for Tom Finney's English FA XI in 1961; but more especially Carlaw Park, the rugby league headquarters, where twelve soccer games between 1922 and 1969 attracted approximately 180,000 spectators.

Back at Blandford, Auckland were beaten 8-4 (5-3 at halftime) by the English amateurs in 1937, and the rest of New Zealand scored only two goals against the visitors in eight games.

Other Auckland achievements at the

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park included the two 3-3 draws with South Africa in 1947 and the beating of the FK Austria club 3-0 in 1957 and of Australia 2-1 in 1958. This win was particularly satisfying to those of us who had seen Australia beat Auckland 5-0 and 8-0 in 1948.

But in some ways the most memorable day at the park was in 1955 when Auckland Province played a Hong Kong club and a see-sawing game ended at 5-5 was watched by 10,000, the record for the ground.

A sensational game was the North Island final of the Chatham Cup in 1949 when Eden drew 2-2 with Petone Settlers. The game was eventually called off through failing light after 40 minutes of extra time. In the replay Petone won 4-0 at Wellington.

Then there were the many stirring games between the arch-rivals North Shore and Eastern Suburbs and the once-frequent games between the Navy and Auckland for the Drummond Cup which petered out in the mid-50s, when the Navy, who had not won since 1939 could no longer hold the Auckland second division reps, let alone the first.

The Falcon Cup knockout was disappointingly discontinued about the same time although it had a long history and gave clubs each year, a second chance to win a trophy.

Perhaps the funniest incident was about 1952 when Auckland B was leading a Merchant Navy selection by 4-0 after about half an hour. The Auckland goalkeeper, Harry Sime, decided the sailors needed some encouragement, and accidentally on purpose knocked the ball into his own goal. The visitors finally went down 8-3.

In the post-war years I don't think any crowd for a local club match exceeded 1600 (sometimes it was only half that), but the North Island final of the Chatham Cup regularly drew 4000, and more than that sometimes watched the end of season "International Tournament", begun in 1956.

Local players, including the best from Gisborne and the Waikato played for teams according to their country of origin. There was England, Holland, New Zealand and The Rest. Later there was Scotland. The players took it seriously and there were some fine games.

## **Sitter! can be purchased at the following outlets:**

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Accent Magazines, Hamilton &  
Napier City Rovers Club Shop  
Canterbury Mags, Armagh Bookshop, Edgeware Books (all Christchurch)

Gotham Comics, Onehunga  
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**and...**

**Mr Gordon's Laundry Service 115 Valley Rd, Mt Eden**