

## Up front



## Are you sure it's the manager you want to speak to?

Don't know about you, but I'm finding it very annoying listening to the increasingly moronic terminology which has drifted into our soccer these days.

I interviewed a northern league coach a couple of months ago where he told me the problem with his (losing) team was they committed "too many turnovers".

"You mean you struggle to retain possession," I corrected him.

"Yes, we're turning it over all the time," he insisted, absolutely determined to display the effects of having watched too many rugby games on Sky television.

Another one that never fails to irritate me, which also has rugby origins, is "second phase". This is invariably shouted out by an agitated coach just before a free kick is lumped into the penalty box (at either end).

"Second phase," the coach warns, to nobody in particular.

I can only assume this triggers some latent electrical knowledge in his players, because you'll note it is never accompanied by any other instruction on what exactly they should do with, or in, the second phase. It's meaningless and silly.

I'd argue soccer, as a relatively fluid game, is not one to be broken into numbered phases. But, if, for argument's sake, we were to pretend it is, how come players are never ever alerted to the dangers of the first or third phases? It's always this bloody second phase, and I'm well sick of it.

Anyway, I'm not going to bang on about this for the next five pages. It was simply a means of illustrating how increasingly we are using different terminology in our soccer, compared to the Brits.

For instance, in the UK "the manager" is the gaffer. He's the boss, the numero uno, the Don of Dons. But here in dear old New Zealand the manager sorts the laundry, half time drinks, and books the bus. He is the bag-man, while the coach is the bloke who is in charge.

I was reminded of this fact in early September when the story broke that Paul Gascoigne was supposedly on his way to play for the Kingz. (See also Talking Bollocks, P24, for the Herald's hash of this.)

Whether he is burping into microphones, balling his eyes out, or showing fleeting cameos of delightful skill, England's answer to Michael Utting makes good copy. So Fleet St were onto it, and naturally hunted down the Football Kingz manager, Barry Williams, who by all accounts does a top job getting the players onto the bus on time.

Anyway, here's our Bazza on Gazza: "Getting a player of Gascoigne's profile would be good for the image of the game down here," he was widely quoted as saying in UK media. "We are pretty much a sporting-orientated country, and obviously a person of his calibre and quality would be a great bonus for a club like us."

This was, of course, hours before Chris Turner was contacted and immediately dismissed the story as a load of old tosh (and quietly made a mental note to make sure

Williams never spoke to the media again).

It's probably the first time anyone from the media has approached Williams for his opinion. It's certainly the first time I've seen him quoted in the media since he took up his post at the start of the Fallon regime -- and who could blame him for sounding so managerial rather than immediately referring the rat pack to Chris Turner or Ken Dugdale.

Meanwhile you could just imagine these journos from the BBC to the Guardian noting to themselves how much more approachable Bazza was, compared to the managers they usually deal with: Alex Ferguson, Arsene Wenger etc.

Funnily enough, the Kingz are actually an exception in our footballing ranks in that they promote Turner as their "general manager" as the man in charge, and the first port of call. But for outsiders especially, confusion comes with then also having a "team manager" (Barry Williams). At the risk of making a mockery of my earlier rant on bastard terminology, perhaps in the Kiwi game there is a case for renaming what we know as the team manager as the "team facilitator". At least it sounds less managerial.

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Well, what about the Kingz then? I was delighted to see them give Northern Spirit a good 4-1 spanking in their own mitten, if only because such a result was well overdue against a number of these Australian club sides which are actually pretty modest outfits with startling little ambition to really have a go, even at home.

As a bonus, it was tremendous to see Harry Ngata bag the jolly lot. Harry was something of an afterthought for the Kingz this season under their new low-budget approach, despite being arguably their most consistent performer over the last three seasons. While he doesn't naturally appeal as an archetypical targetman because of his small stature, he has tidy skills and I'd have to say the best game I've ever seen him play was actually in that role, against Brazil at Guadulahara (which ain't too bad on the CV).

For all that, don't expect to see him thrashing in the goals every week. He desperately needs somebody running off him up front. The Kingz have played four games as I write, and I've come to the conclusion they have way too many wide players, too many midfielders, and far too few options up front.

Patricio Almendra is as impressive as we remember from a few years back, but Andy Vlahos, and Jeff Campbell in the same starting line-up? Nah. Incidentally, if I was going to toss one of them out, it would be Vlahos, despite him winning player of the year last season.

He's always struck me as a half-pie sort of player, and as a paying fan nothing annoys me more than seeing him pull out of challenges or end his runs way too soon.

However, to be fair, that's partially a reflection of "Kiwi fan syndrome". This is a condition under which we implore our players to "get stuck in". The biggest crime they can commit is not getting stuck in.

Our supporter comments all relate toward sheer endeavour rather than finesse. If they listened to us, no doubt we'd be pretty quick to moan at the resultant spectacle, but then again, torrents of sideline abuse are all part of what makes soccer the world's greatest game.

Anyway, I digress. The other point about the Kingz has been dodgy defending. Sure, Hiroshi Miyazawa is not as bad as last season, but he is still far too susceptible to being caught flat footed when teams attack other than through route 1 methods.

And pairing him with the disappointing John "The Fonz" Foundalakis, as happened against Perth Glory, must have given us the slowest central defensive pairing in the league. On the credit side, Jonathan Taylor has looked solid, if definitely in the "no-frills" defensive category, and youngsters James Pritchett and Steven Turner have done okay. Overall, the Kingz have made a better start than I expected. Hell, we were top of the league for a week.

For all that, there is still much to be done. It's like a formula one race. You can be doing well, but you still have to have pit stops and re-fuel, make repairs, or you're going to be caught pretty easily.

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Still on the subject of the Kingz, about six weeks ago I attended a (non-soccer) conference, where the speakers included INL's managing director of publishing, Rick Neville. Neville passed a couple of pretty blunt comments on Sky Television and the Football Kingz. He noted how Sky (where INL took its shareholding to over 66 per cent in mid-2001) had lost \$30.2 million (but said that was better than it sounded because large proportion of the loss was attributable to the company's strategies of growing the subscriber base, which was very healthy).

Neville aired his views that Sky's directors were relatively "soft" and it had taken an injection of hard-nosed INL-style management to get them to make difficult decisions like increasing their charges more regularly. But of particular interest to Sitter! readers would be his criticisms of Sky's foray into Football Kingz ownership.

"The Sky annual loss would have only been \$26 million but for an ill-fated venture in buying the Kingz," he said. "It was just a dumb thing the company did.

"We thought we could make money out of a soccer team and it cost us \$4 million. We've flicked the Kingz to some other mug now."

Those sentiments suggest it could be make or break for the Kingz in more than just playing achievements this season. They need to raise \$2.2 million to cover their costs this season

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Was anybody surprised to see Dallas Fisher, founding Force Three board member and the bloke responsible for finances in the year they overspent \$105,000, featuring on the front page of the Waikato Times photo of the opening night of the Hamilton casino?

There was Fisher, in the front row of the blackjack table in his monkey suit, looking totally hypnotised by his lousy hand of 15.

Fisher of course was the chap who failed to show at Force Three's annual meeting in Rotorua in June to explain to angry delegates exactly why they were being asked to cough up more money after the federation's \$100,000 spending binge. Was the casino photo somehow wickedly symbolic? You might think so, we couldn't possibly comment.

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Congratulations to Caversham on winning the national league promotion-relegation series, even if it will mean an extra \$92,000 on the league travel bill.

Aside from anything else, their success is a sock in the eye for conceited northerners (such as myself), who are forever telling people that the northern premier league is the second highest in New Zealand.

Well, going on playoff results, where Wellington's Western Suburbs finished second, Waitakere third and Glenfield fourth, you'd have to now argue the north was the

weakest region. Glenfield were worthy winners of this year's northern premier league. I thought they were a step ahead of every other club, and played their matches at a good clip, with striker Dean Dodds (the targetman the Kingz should really have given a chance to) their key player. The only thing I'd say in defence of northern conceit – and I can't offer any empirical evidence here – is that I suspect the northern premier league's second-seventh ranked clubs would be a lot more competitive than their southern counterparts. That is, there is more depth of competition in the north. There, I've said it. I now await a torrent of rebuttals and abuse.

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I'll miss Waitakere City now they're no longer in the national league. I say this after being surprised at the level of their unpopularity among fans of other clubs. ("Arrogance" seems to be the main charge).

For me they were one of those clubs you'd love to hate. But give them their due, for over a decade they were aristocrats of the national league. They were the yardstick you'd measure your club against, and they didn't half put a few half-decent line-ups together for something like nine national titles. Sure, they played a hard-nosed brand of football, perhaps more "winning formula" style than classic pitter-patter stuff, and were populated by some pretty uncompromising characters.

But for those who accuse them of being arrogant, I reckon they had every right to be singing their own praises most of the time, after five national titles through the 90s.

Some of the most exciting national league matches I ever saw were at Waitakere; Western Springs then Fred Taylor Park, surely the most wind-exposed venue in New Zealand. I loved those Waikato United-Waitakere matches over the years. Sure, outbreaks of soccer marred the fighting sometimes, and 9 v 9 is not quite the same as the 11-a-side game, but you could always cut the tension with a lino knife.

What disappointed me about the playoffs was they didn't seem to be conducted under a level playing field.

Regional league clubs had to stick with their season-long players, while Waitakere were able to ship in players like Simon Eaddy, Jeff Campbell, Tim Stevens, and Darren McLennan, all of whom had played for other clubs over winter. Was this fair? It's debatable, though in the end was not a significant factor.

All the same, I'd be interested to hear other people's thoughts on whether the registration deadline for the play-offs could be set to better embrace the spirit of the game.

The other thing about Waitakere's demise was it did highlight the structural mess of our game. Waitakere were relegated to the northern premier league -- just a couple of weeks after their reserve team were promoted to the same competition.

As one Waitakere wag (from the reserve team) noted: "all we want to know is who wears the away strip when we meet at Fred Taylor Park next season."

As it happens, they won't get to play in that division at all, of course. With their first team no longer in the national league, under northern league rules their reserve team must revert to the (northern league) third division. Even then, if they don't meet the criteria of having enough junior and women's teams they could be out altogether.

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An Auckland reader (who is desperate not to be named) has suggested I might have been a little unfair in my critique of New Zealand Soccer's annual report last issue, if not my doubts over the outgoing chairman.

He reckons most sports bodies comparable with soccer in terms of financial clout and personnel would do little differently to NZ Soccer in annual reporting.

So as an anorakish exercise I checked out the 2001-02 New Zealand Hockey Federation annual report. They're a smaller code numbers-wise but run a significant international programme at World Cup, Olympic and age group levels and would seem to operate similar high-performance, domestic, academy and age-group programmes to soccer across both genders.

Their annual report was a glossy, full-colour, 30-page A4-sized effort which documented everything that happened in domestic competition, noted all key milestones in the game, provided a breakdown of affiliation numbers by province, analysed registration trends and gave contact details for all associations.

More importantly, it offered a chairman's report which stated opposition to Sparc's funding policies and politely noted that all code's successes could be directly attributable to improved funding of international competition. It also commented on the importance of sponsorship, a new strategic plan and other components of reaching peak performances. In short, it was something that hadn't been written by a moron.

The chief executive's report offered a detailed overview of hockey affairs in 10 different spheres and summarised the sport's strategic plan. It was written by somebody who was eager to convey the vitality of the sport rather than toll the bell.

But most importantly of all, in financial statements, it gave a well-rounded picture of what was happening in the game. From these I could see that gate takings had plummeted but sponsorships had skyrocketed, at the same time as getting a breakdown on major grants, and affiliation fees.

Administrative expenditure was well tabulated, from salaries and rent down to newsletter and postage costs. The report provided a separate breakdown of hockey's coaching and development expenditure and another summarising competition expenditure. It was a model for the financial transparency we were promised under soccer's federation structure but have largely still to see. In comparison, soccer simply does not stack up. In the circumstances, I stand by the criticisms I made of NZ Soccer's annual report last issue.

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A couple of months ago I received a surprise in the mail. It was a \$15 parking ticket from Marlborough Roads for an infringement supposedly committed in Blenheim in May, by my PELE10-registered car.

Having not been anywhere in Marlborough for nearly 20 years, I had a good laugh, and wrote back, noting how officialdom so often gets it wrong in these days of personalised plates, denying liability and threatening to fight this thing all the way to Fifa if necessary, seeking enough costs to pave our way to the Confederations Cup.

I was delighted a few weeks later to get a letter from Marlborough Roads parking administrator Keith Turner acknowledging the culprit they were after was PELE10 (an "O" rather than a zero).

"Yes, I put my hand up and acknowledge that I got rather excited seeing the name Pele, being the all-time king of football, and got carried away and typed in the big O instead of nil when entering the registration number onto the computer," Turner wrote.

So, Pele strikes again. Why I mention this here (apart from the fact it nicely fills up the requisite space, of course) is I am willing to wager the person who owns this car is a Sitter! reader/anorak. If that person would like to contact me (I can check the details against ownership records) they will get a Sitter! car sticker. -- **Bruce Holloway.**