

Up front



What an embarrassment

Well, that's it then. Rock bottom. The pits. The biggest embarrassment we've seen in New Zealand soccer in decades. We've been absolutely humbled.

No, I'm not talking about the Kingz truly astonishing barrel-scraping efforts in the NSL, but Ken Dugdale's sudden decision to toss in his All Whites and NZ technical directing jobs to go and coach at a club any reader here (apart from Wombat, naturally) would struggle to locate on a world map.

That's really put us in our place. The All Whites now rank lower in soccer's food chain than FK Vesteralen, a second-

division Norwegian club based in the Lofoten Islands just north (if that is possible) of the Arctic circle.

We're talking here about a club which has only been in existence for a couple of years. But compared to us here at the final frontier, even they have their pulling power.

Vesteralen's advantage is they play more than once a year, which does have a certain magnetism for a coach.

Worse still, the real barometer of soccer's sad state is not so much that the coach goes, but nobody around here seems to give a blind stuff.

My initial view was that at the very least Dugdale owed the soccer public an explanation. I'm not so sure now.

In the last 12 months we've seen public angst and outcry over the replacement of national netball (Aitken for Willering) and rugby coaches (Mitchell for Smith). By contrast, Dugdale's departure hardly seems to have drawn a shrug of the shoulders from anyone. Where were the angry talkback callers? Where were the letters to the editor? Where were the outbursts from disaffected fans? Hell, even the NZ Soccer reaction was horribly muted.

It's tempting in a situation like this to suggest it's a classic case of "the dog that didn't bark" as Sherlock Holmes would put it. (ie That nobody was upset because we were all delighted to see him go).

That was definitely the case with his predecessor Joe McGrath. But the spooky thing is statistics show Dugdale was actually our most successful coach ever. Of the 35 games played under him, the All Whites won 16, drew six and lost 13.

We won 51 per cent of our games under Dugdale (comparison with other NZ coaches: Juan Schwanner 50%, Wally Hughes 47%, Barrie Truman 41%, John Ashead 41%, Allan Jones 38%, Ian Marshall 37%, Kevin Fallon 37%, Bobby Clark 36%, Ken Armstrong 34%, Joe McGrath 25%, Lou Brocic 22%, Keith Pritchett 18%.)

Okay, okay, put down that pen -- I agree, such figures have the potential to be horribly misleading (could be a case of playing most of your matches against Cook Islands, couldn't it?). But under Dugdale, the All Whites' world ranking did improve from 131 in August 1998, to a high of 81 in May last year.

What's really bugging me about Dugdale's departure is not that we've lost a settled and modestly successful coach, but my deep-seated "fan" reaction that he has completely debased the culture of being our national coach. Historically I've always thought of coaches as "honorary fans" -- men driven by the same passions in pursuit of

excellence for their teams.

But here we have a gaffer putting himself on the meat market, like any garden-variety player. Real fans don't switch allegiances in such fashion. Indeed, they're more likely to change their wife than change their team.

The bottom line is I want an All Whites coach who is driven by the same desires, who sees the job as an aesthetic thing in itself rather than a stepping stone to, er, the Arctic circle.

Imagine if we here at Sitter! suddenly shut up shop and shipped out because we'd received a better offer to write for a Norwegian fanzine.

When he pulled the plug Dugdale said in a Wellington paper he had no hesitation on turning his back on his "month-by-month" contract with NZ Soccer.

NZ Soccer disputes this. They say he was on "a normal employment contract, no fixed term with a month's notice required". Interestingly the month's notice was waived. In classic Kingz fashion, for some reason NZ Soccer wanted to do all they could to assist the departure of their chosen man.

Stranger still, it was illuminating to see Sitter! subscriber Andre Zlotowski receive an email from a Vesteralen fan every bit as baffled as us about Dugdale's appointment. The club enjoys home crowds of about 300.

Wrote Jostein Nygard: *"My question to you, why on earth made Ken Dugdale resign as coach for the All Whites, to begin coaching a second division club in Norway? I imagine that even bench fillers like Cook Islands, draws a bigger audience than any of FK Vesteralen's matches. Was there a disagreement with the NZ leadership? Did he get tired of the New Zealand weather? If so, why move to Sortland with the same nature and the same weather, only several degrees lower? I would appreciate if you could shed some light on this mystery."* Well, sorry mate. It's got us stuffed as well.

But on the subject of "mysteries" here's another one: was it just sheer co-incidence that prior to his departure Dugdale -- who had previously made three trips to Norway -- had just happened to have planned a five-match Scandinavian tour in preparation for the Oceania Nations Cup? We'll certainly be taking a closer interest in future proposed All White itineraries. Could be a pointer to all sorts of things.

Result-wise, Dugdale's legacy as All Whites coach was getting us past Australia in 1998 and off to the Confederations Cup in 1999. Style-wise it was putting a major emphasis on the All Whites becoming comfortable at playing the ball out of defence rather than banging it up the field (even if this did cost us the 2002 WC qualifiers).

Dugdale did a pretty steady job with the resources available to him, even if he did occasionally leave fans wondering about selections (such as pulling Brad Scott out of the Central Reserves team to play for the All Whites).

All in all, I'd give Dugdale a pass mark. To put his achievements in historical context, the All Whites were directionless under Keith Pritchett, and you never got the impression Joe McGrath cared. At least with Dugdale there was a sense of ownership, even if he entered the job with perhaps the thinnest CV of any of our national coaches.

More problematic is evaluating his achievements as national technical director. It staggered me that no coaching report was presented in last year's NZS annual report, while despite the formation of national academies, I can't see tangible signs of much impact at all.

And it was very telling to see the reaction of Tauranga coach (and Sitter! subscriber) Larry Seales in the Tauranga City United v Dunedin Technical match programme on

April 14 on Dugdale's resignation.

He wrote (in part): "I say good riddance... In his years as Coaching Director I have not been invited to one coaching seminar or any other upskilling seminar for Level 3 or National League coaches. Not nearly good enough I'm afraid..."

Again, to put everything in context it is necessary to look back. Before McGrath arrived, the technical director's post was the biggie, the full-time post. The All White job was the part-time one.

It's perhaps timely to recall Bill MacGowan pointing out at the time, that different skills were required for the two posts.

"The person who can stand up and lecture and prepare courses is maybe not the right person to work with a team." And vice-versa, Bill.

It raises the issue of the best method of settling on a long-term successor (Mick Waitt has it until after the Oceania qualifiers). When we look at coaches for the All Whites, so often the immediate response is to go for somebody who has had big success at domestic level. But as a rule this means looking at coaches who have had a big budget to work with or the pick of the litter in other respects.

The problem here is, with the All Whites, more often than not you're working with the worst team in the league -- so to speak -- rather than the best, which is a totally different kettle of fish. In looking for an All Whites coach my gut reaction would be to look for someone who has really had to roll their sleeves up and get results from working with very little... ie no imports, no swag of signings at the start of the season, no big budget, but a decent level of success.

Having said that, Waitt appeals as a sensible appointment. He offers continuity (not that that's a big factor when you don't play from year to year) has a proven track record at Napier, and cobbled together a good young Capital Soccer side in the national youth league.

Interesting though, isn't it, to note as the baton is once more passed on, that the All Whites have never had a New Zealand-born coach. Of course, on that score it was truly frightening to see Jamie Douglas suggesting in the Evening Post (it was an April 1 column) that the All Whites should draw on Wynton Rufer's "proven coaching skills" for the position. Somebody should tell Douglas that Wynton has rarely coached anyone above youth level. It was actually the other Ingham twin who did the coaching at the Kingz, North Shore etc.

But it would have certain surreal appeal. Maybe Wynton could get a special contractual clause that would specify he didn't have to turn up to training where it clashed with his self-promotional schedule.

Waitt's initial 32-man squad contained all the usual suspects, including seven Kingz players. It struck me as the sort of squad you might name if you hadn't seen a single Kingz game. I find it hard to reconcile the selection of players such as Mark Burton, Jonathon Perry, and our own occasional contributor Sean Douglas (nobody accuses us of having favourites, Sean) with the dreadful form they have shown this year. And he's selected a goalkeeper (Jason Batty) who is not even with a club.

Ancient history now, but I was there for the Kingz final home game of the season, against Adelaide, perched on the periphery of the hallowed Bloc 5.

The sound effects were telling in contrast to the pledges of undying support at the

start of the season.

Here's some of the dialogue I picked up...

-- "Banks and Burton -- our two worst players..."

-- "That's only because Hiroshi didn't get on the field enough."

-- "Or Douglas. But for his injury he would have had it."

-- "How high do you want the goal?!!"

-- "TACKLE Douglas. Try it once, you might like it."

-- "None of the Kingz like tackling. In the first year they did." (On cue, Jackson and Markovski both make tackles).

-- "No movement, no options up front." (Oops, that's me, despairing on the lack of intelligent movement up front.)

-- "Banks has got eight left feet."

-- "You don't have to root the ball -- just pass it." (After Perry clunks an overhit ball forward.)

-- "Are you Central in disguise." (Central United had been tanked 7-1 hours beforehand).

-- "Banks has got the ball tied to his foot on a piece of string. Unfortunately the piece of string is 8m long."

-- (As a chance goes begging) "Why don't they hit it first time? They never hit it first time."

-- (Banks is subbed). "Well at least Banks is off."

-- "Fallon's shite."

-- "We'll support you ever more."

Afterwards, on my way to the Kingz mandatory post-match press conference I meet James "Big Mac" McOnie, the affable Sunday Star-Times correspondent. He apologises that he's not sticking around.

"I'm all press conferenced out," Mac says. "They (SS Times) will only give me 30cm and I've got more than enough stories already."

Because it's Good Friday usual media liaison man Jeremy "Devout" Ruane isn't in attendance. Big Mac warns that in the circumstances I'll probably have to go and hunt the coaches down myself if I want a word.

The only other person in the press room is my colleague Grant "Sack Fallon" Stantiall, which is nice. I return up the corridor and rap on the Kingz dressing room door.

"I'd like a word with Kevin," I tell the dweeb.

Fallon comes out and tells me I'm early. "Jeremy always comes and gets me".

"Not today," I tell him. "Sitter! Are the only ones interested in what you've got to say these days."

"Nah McOnie always comes," Fallon says. "I'm sure I saw him holding up the 'Fallon Out' sign on the terraces."

I ask Fallon which of his players, in all seriousness, he could recommend to the new All Whites coach. He refuses to comment. "I'd be doing his job for him if I told you."

As to his own future, he's uncertain.

"I'll have to see the way the club is going to be constructed, whether it is amateur or professional. You ain't going to get a better system going part-time."

Fallon calls the Kingz post "one of the most difficult jobs in football". (Most bottom-of-the-table coaches say that.) "If we get through these times we will be strong." (Ditto.)

Fallon says his traumatic experiences with the Kingz haven't shaken his coaching approach.

"I will stick with my methods: observe, expose, replace."

He laments the dearth of local players capable of making the step-up. "The national league is at an all-time low. Have you seen any players capable of making this standard?"

Actually I have seen players capable of bettering the standard I've just seen on the pitch, but I know that's not what Fallon means.

"I've done the best with what I've got, but we badly need a shot of pace," he says.

I ask him to nominate his player of the year. "Michael Theoklitos." His best New Zealanders? "Harry Ngata had a good year, with Jackson not far behind."

Fallon says he is not upset at Bloc 5 banners calling for his sacking. "I know how little most people know about football... I don't want to be too critical. We need them."

Our discussion rambles for ages, to the bemusement of the Adelaide coach who is obliged by competition statute to be there. As a parting suggestion to Fallon (I think Stantiall's parting effort was to suggest he bloody well resign) I recommend he ring Iain Gillies at the Gisborne Herald and order 20 old copies of "The Class of 84", the book which charted the remarkable dressing shed-angled story of Gisborne City's national league title win, at the time when Fallon was coach.

"Dish them out at training," I advise. "They might remind everyone how soccer is as much about passion, belief, and a unity of purpose as the mechanics of 4-4-2."

Fallon laughs. "You're like me pal, a soccer romantic. But it wouldn't work. Not here."

I find it hard to disagree with my colleague Grant Stantiall on a recent criticism he made on GOALNET about comments passed in the Tauranga City United programme.

Len Bailey wrote in his snippets column (April 14): "*Overseas, it was sad to see Liverpool go out to Bayer Leverkusen in that 4-2 thriller which must have been almost heart-stopping for their manager Gerard Houllier. Hopefully Manchester United can reap revenge for English soccer when they meet Leverkusen in the semi-final.*"

Stantiall's point was why should New Zealand soccer fans automatically think that it was sad for an English side to lose to a continental side?

Stantiall, who is not averse to designating himself president of the NZ Leverkusen Fan Club, wasn't sad at all. Indeed he was quite happy that the best footballing side had won (not to mention the money he had on the result at the TAB).

"I take umbrage that someone is assuming that I'd prefer the English sides to win all the time," Stantiall wrote. "Maybe the thing here is that because we speak English then it's natural to support English sides. That's right cock in my book."

It's fine for ex-pats to wish clubs from dear old Blighty to win, but there's more than a shade of "colonial cringe" to expect other than keen Liverpool supporters amongst Kiwis to do likewise.

Now that we're in the brave new post-Dempsey era of soccer politics, it was refreshing to see Soccer Australia weigh into the Fifa presidential elections, demanding both candidates state their intentions about Oceania's World Cup path in advance of the vote. SA chairman Ian Knop said he wanted to know how incumbent Sepp Blatter and challenger Issa Hayatou would require Oceania to qualify for future World Cups before declaring his support for either.

Weeks earlier I'd asked New Zealand Soccer for clarification on whether they numbered among the supporters of the increasingly desperate Blatter but was told they didn't make public pronouncements on such things as voting intentions.

By contrast Knop's very public button-holing of candidates -- he asked for written confirmation of their policies -- recognised the importance of establishing a clear understanding of candidate positions in advance of the vote.

But more than that, by making a press statement advising of their intentions to put the heat on the soccer politicians, they sent a message to their own stakeholders that they were on the ball. I'd like to see New Zealand Soccer pluck up the courage to be just as pro-active on such matters.

– Bruce Holloway

Apology

At this point we were set to present a review of the Kingz season, as prepared by a fan who is closer to the action than most. Sadly, despite agreeing to pen the article, the fan in question has not come up with the goods. And we can't wait any longer. The net result is there's a larger-than usual Federation-watch piece on the hi-jinks in soccer politics at present.

Oceania Football of the Year

Harry Kewell was named Oceania Footballer of the Year. It was the second win for Kewell, who also took the title in 1999. Second was Mark Viduka, while Ryan Nelsen was the best Kiwi in seventh place. Third-placed Brett Emerton might have been expected to do better.

Interestingly Maramas Vahirua, the 21-year-old Tahitian striker, topped all the Kiwis who attracted votes. The annual poll of soccer journalists is convened by Australia's Ted Simmons.

There was clear evidence at least six voters needed to be drug-tested after giving the nod to Mark Burton, who had been in dire form, while we'd like to know who voted for Tonga's Loko Taufahema.

Full results: Harry Kewell (Aus) 87 votes, Mark Viduka (Aus) 83, Brett Emerton (Aus) 59, Craig Moore (Aus) 23, Mark Schwarzer (Aus) 19, Maramas Vahirua (Tahiti) 17, Ryan Nelsen (NZ) 15, Ivan Vicelich (NZ) 14, Simon Elliott (NZ) 9, Paul Okon (Aus) 8, Christian Karembeu (New Caledonia) 7, Mark Burton (NZ) 6, Commings Menapi (Solomon Islands) 5, Richard Iwai (Vanuatu) 4, Paul Agostino (Aus) 3, Vaughan Coveny (NZ) 1, Danny Tiatto (Aus) 1, Kevin Muscat (Aus) 1, Damian Mori (Aus) 1, Loko Taufahema (Tonga) 1.