

The state of Scottish Football

by Andrew Blair

Scottish football is in an interesting place at the moment, but by no means a happy one. For a start, it wouldn't be entirely surprising if a large number of December's scheduled games end up being played in March, thus bringing up the argument that the season should be moved so the ever-dwindling close season is during Winter, rather than Summer. It is how football is played in many countries in Northern Europe, after all, and would mean fewer problems with fixture congestion. The argument against it remains that, during major international tournaments some players would not be available, and that European Club tournaments would remain playing through Winter and so our clubs taking part in those tournaments would be at a disadvantage.

Firstly, the number of players in the SPL and SFL who would be involved in the World Cup is increasingly few. It would affect the Old Firm more than any other team, but it could be argued that they have the squads to cope with it and an emphasis on youth is vital to the future of the national team. Plus, anything that weakens them, albeit temporarily, is a good thing for competition. Furthermore it could be argued that, with Georgios Samaras on International duty with Greece, Celtic would actually be strengthened by it. Certainly Summer football seems increasingly like a viable option, if no-one is happy with a Winter Break as was used in the early years of the SPL.

Of course if you hate football this would be terrible, as the game would be played all year round, but then if you hate football you shouldn't be reading this and getting yourself unnecessarily angry, should you?

✘ In other news, Scotland's referees went on strike a week or two back. Hugh Dallas, the SFA's Referee Development Officer, resigned over a separate issue, and the referee at the centre of the furore has now resigned. The Linesman involved was the first to go even though he is widely acknowledged to have done nothing wrong. In Dallas' case it was because he sent group emails referring to the Catholic Church's Sex Scandals at the time of the Pope's visit, but the referee in question – Dougie McDonald – had given a false version of events surrounding a controversial disallowed penalty to Celtic in a match against Dundee United (Celtic eventually won 2 – 1).

Celtic manager Neil Lennon complained bitterly and frequently (as is his style) at the injustices surrounding his team at the time (including an incredibly soft penalty decision in Rangers' favour in the next Old Firm match), leading to the accusation that referees in Scotland were engaged in a conspiracy against Celtic. This was backed up by some players, and the fact that Hugh Dallas endorsed McDonald's match report which gave a false reason for the disallowed penalty. From this point onwards every refereeing decision in the SPL was under intense scrutiny, the pressure culminating in last weekend's strike.

The enlightened among you may have been able to spot several moments when common sense should have prevailed here. Firstly, when asked why he'd reversed the penalty decision, Dougie McDonald shouldn't have lied. He also shouldn't have placed blame on his linesman. Hugh Dallas, furthermore, shouldn't have joined in. Neil Lennon should've done what one of his players did and not react like a petulant child, exacerbating the situation massively. What McDonald's retiring does is confirm that Celtic were right to complain in that instance, not that there is any sort of vendetta against them. To claim so has not only made a bad situation worse but also flies in the face of reality.

Since 2005 Celtic have won the league three times, and the Scottish and League Cups twice. Compare this to their European Record of occasionally humiliating failures – are we to assume that they have somehow managed to do better in a competition where the officials are against them than in one when they are neutral? Seven tournament successes with referees against them and a peak of getting knocked out by Barcelona 4 – 2 on aggregate suggest that, maybe, they do better when there is a massive conspiracy against them. Indeed, so subtle is this conspiracy that occasionally it manifests itself in dubious decisions going for them. As, indeed, happens to all teams. The Old Firm probably do get more decisions in their favour because it is difficult for Referees to ignore fifty thousand people shouting at them without it influencing you slightly. Yes this is unfair, but the Old Firm are behemoths of the unfair. It is their way. End of.

So, in conclusion: as soon as the SFA replace all their former staff there will probably be a discussion on changing the timetable of Scottish football; the referee's strike is annoying but probably justified, and there were plenty of opportunities for all concerned to stop it from happening; if there is a conspiracy in Scottish football against Celtic, it's a completely rubbish one.

By the by, I watched Hibs play St Johnstone at the weekend. Occasionally both teams threatened to narrowly miss, but never to score. It was oddly calming.

Andrew Blair is a St Johnstone fan and is cynical. The two facts may be related.

During his first football match, when Stark's Park had started its ten year renovation project, he got his hands stuck in a makeshift advertising hoarding. From this point on he was hooked.

While he is capable of looking at the bigger picture and being entirely objective, he acknowledges that it is often more fun not to do so.

He has an entirely rational hatred of Georgios Samaras and his favourite version of Championship Manager is 2000 – 2001. This is because Keigan Parker is as good as he was meant to be in it.

Occasionally, if pressed, he has flashbacks to the Costa Rica game in the 1990 World Cup. This was doubly traumatic for him, as he had just run out of Frosties.