

Anxious wait for Fife Flyers faithful

Tough times these for Fife Flyers who are up for sale and it would be a sad day not to see mascot Geordie Munro strutting around The Fife Ice Arena as fans let rip with the famous words: “I don’t want to go to Idaho, I’d rather stay here in Kirkcaldy”.

But, this is the stark reality and these are anxious times for fans of Britain’s oldest professional ice hockey team. Indeed, they are probably among the most trying in the club’s history which dates back to 1938 when they were established.

The team is up for sale. Interested parties are invited at a time when Flyers prop up the bottom of the ten-strong Elite League with numbers not conducive to a potential buyer, if, indeed, there is one out there.

Eight points from 35 games and 17 behind the next worst team. One win in their last 19 league games, a 5-4 success at fellow-strugglers, Manchester Storm on January 18, makes grim reading.

Fans, rocked by a dramatic form slump which has seen the team fall off a cliff, are drifting away.

Others, including diehard, season ticket holders, are rightly concerned. Their Saturday night would be empty if they did not

jostle for a place in the car park en route to a Flyers home game.

However, make no mistake, the stark reality of the current situation is simple. The prospect of the curtain coming down on top flight hockey at the Auld Barn is looming large.

The clock is undoubtedly ticking to find a new owner. He would get the name – one of the most recognisable in British ice hockey – but not a lot else. Players only have short-term contracts.

A newcomer would have to negotiate ice time, raise cash to fund contract negotiations with the agents of potential incoming players, and recruit an off-ice team to arrange and look after equipment, travel, accommodation et al, as well as running the club daily.

The season ends in April and, my understanding is, that the Elite League will need to know by May if Fife are to compete next season.

Why? Because they have to draw up the fixture list.

The current crisis has been sparked by the decision of long-standing directors, Tom Muir and Jack Wishart, to step-down after nearly three decades.

Yes, there has been murmuring in the background for some time that things need to change, but the statement from Muir and Wishart arrived without notice last week.

Indeed, the media were not alerted and the statement suddenly appeared on the club's website and social media channels, taking supporters and the press by surprise.

What now? A fans takeover? Yes, there will be fans out there who would love to do that. Fantasy land, I'm afraid.

Knowing, what it costs to run an Elite League team, keeping

within a tight cost structure even for a low-budget team, and dealing with the myriad of issues that happen during a season, that would appear a non-starter.

A consortium of local businessmen with acumen? Yes, possible, there are models elsewhere, but their core business would have to be stable and protected to allow them to devote a huge amount of time to hockey. Only when you are in the hot seat do you realise what it takes to run a professional team in whatever sport.

Also, Kirkcaldy is not a city. Yes, there is a hockey tradition, but tradition does not put bums on seats. Older fans don't all come in the chill of mid-winter and the area is not blessed with a huge population from which to draw new and younger.

So, sadly, 87 years of hockey is on the line here and this body blow comes as fans prepare to celebrate the 40th anniversary of one of the greatest days in Flyers' history, their historic, 1985, British Championship success at Wembley.

Events are being planned currently, but the potential demise of the famous Flyers could put a damper on that.

What are the options? Remain in with the elite. Can Flyers compete in the long-term against big budget Sheffield Steelers, who pull up to 9,000 fans, Belfast Giants, the current Elite League pace-setters, another club with huge resources compared to Fife?

Fife's attendance last Sunday for the derby with arch rivals, Dundee Stars, was 1,317. Derby games are usually massive crowd pullers and there have been games in which there were fewer occupied seats in the arena.

The club could, of course, take a break from the big time and re-group. It has happened before then Fife put their hands up to join the Elite League.

They could drop into the Northern Ice Hockey League, but the nearest team is Solway Sharks with the rest over the Border, teams listed on the website as Leeds Knights, Hull Seahawks, Sheffield Steeldogs, Telford Tigers, Peterborough Panthers, Milton Keynes Lightning, Swindon Wildcats, Bristol Pitbulls, Romford Raiders and Berkshire Bees.

Fife, and their opposition, would have to fund long, costly trips to games.

Kirkcaldy Kestrels play in the Scottish National League out of the Fife Ice Arena. That could lead to Confusion.com.

Other teams will be watching this, with concern. Elite League bosses will not wish to see a famous name disappear from the standings, but it could.

So, cutting to the chase, the stark reality here is that somebody needs to pop their head above the parapet soon.

Otherwise the lights could go out on elite hockey in Kirkcaldy and Geordie Munro would be forced to hang up his mascot uniform for the final time.