

Bring back the magic of the FA Cup – so says The Real FA Cup team

The FA Cup is, arguably, a tarnished bastion of English professional football in times where the collection of wealth has become a greater priority than glory. League status and European qualification is more lucrative than the kudos of a cup win or run, so priorities have been adjusted accordingly. As a consequence this oldest of cup tournaments is now not taken seriously by the vast majority of clubs in the top two tiers of the English pyramid. The majority of Championship clubs have their eye on the main prize of promotion to the cash cow, the majority of lower Premier League clubs are too busy sucking nervously at the udders to bother with the Cup*, and the top Premier League sides are more interested in getting in to, or retaining their place in, the top four.

That's life, and the lure of cold hard cash is not just the preserve of the elite, it is also a driver for those in the lower and non leagues, it's just the figures are lower and the need is greater. That lucrative promise of a tie against higher opposition focuses the mind of the lower league sides. While some non-league teams view the early Preliminary/Qualifying rounds in similar ways, the revenue that can be generated just by winning a few games might mean the difference between the club house getting a lick of paint and it being pulled down for houses. But the kudos does also play a part, ask the Giuliano Grazioli's of the world, taking the tournament seriously can invigorate your career.

So, my proposal for improving non-league football is to shake up the FA Cup to give more non-league sides a shot at a league side.

There is an appetite for the Cup in the non-leagues like at no other level. To many it's still the oldest and best loved cup, players can say they played in it despite never playing above the amateur game and a spot in Round 1 is coveted as much as the odd pro covets a Wembley date. The fans feel the same, just look at the (admittedly slightly selective) stats. Southern League Cambridge City got to Round 1 this year and it took them 5 games to get there. In those 5 games, four of them were attended by significantly more than their average league gate of 333. Given they largely played teams in or around the same level in the pyramid, that says a lot about their fans' view of the tournament itself, especially when you consider the attendance drop off when similarly ranked PL or Championship teams are drawn against each other.

The story was even more marked for Hastings United, who got to the dizzy heights of the 3rd Round. Until they got there, they only played fellow non-league sides. In the 2nd

Round they played Harrogate Town, who were only one tier above them in the pyramid and a club of similar stature. Hastings' crowd for the home replay was a mind-boggling 4,028, ten times their average league gate of 404. Similarly to Cambridge City they only had one home FA cup attendance below their league average gate - and even in that very 1st Qualifying Round game the attendance was actually higher than their league average at that time of the season, despite playing a team further down the pyramid.

That's not to say that this applies across the board, of course, some ties turn out to be damp squibs and, as implied above, getting back into pro football can turn higher placed Conference sides off the FA Cup temporarily. And, due to regionalisation of the early rounds, the very smallest teams often find themselves pitted against their fellow league sides, which is a bit dull for fans. A bit like if Norwich were to face Stoke in the 3rd Round, the world and indeed both sets of fans would shrug with indifference. But, that appetite of NL clubs/fans should be embraced, it could invigorate both the non leagues and the FA Cup. Which brings me to the proposition for improving non league football:

Firstly, change the names of the rounds to be more inclusive. The current 1st Round is actually the 7th round of the competition, let's not pretend it isn't. This separatism suggests non league sides don't count and are playing in a different competition just to get into the real competition, a feeling exemplified by the exclusionist colloquialism for the 1st Round onwards, the 'propers'. The football league is now an open shop to non-league teams, why not make the FA Cup seem like that too and start the thing off at Round 1 and be inclusive?



Secondly, bring forward the time when professional clubs enter the competition. Why should these teams be treated so favourably when so many treat the competition with such disdain? Top-two-tier sides have to win less games to win the Cup than many non league sides currently have to win to even get a chance to play those big sides. This seems very unfair. The pot is

skewed as it is, why not even it up a bit, make the league sides work harder to win it and make the non league sides feel further included in their national cup?

Three, (in fact a consequence of the second one) increase the number of non league sides with the potential to draw a league side. At present only 36 non league sides have a chance to draw a league side in the 1st Round. The chances of those sides being from outside the Blue Square system are extremely low, due to the fact that the Conference Premier sides only have to play one game to get in to the main draw and often they only have to beat a side further down the pyramid. When the Conference is full of professional ex-football league sides, the chances for the lower non league sides to progress to the current 1st Round are further distorted. Under our proposals the league clubs would enter with all of the Blue Square leagues sides. Under this system, what would become the 5th Round would comprise 256 teams - with 92 of them from the Football League and Premier League and, therefore, 164 non league sides get the chance to draw a plum tie instead of 36.

OK, so in this system a club in the top 2 tiers drawing a minnow won't field their strongest side but, then again, the vast majority don't field their strongest side in the FA Cup anyway. Also. many pro sides send development or reserve sides to play local non league sides in pre-season now anyway - and those games attract larger than normal crowds at those non league grounds. So, in a competitive match, who is to say that number won't be even larger.

Finally, as happens in France, the lower league side in any tie always plays at home. Many big clubs won't relish this but it makes perfect sense and means they get forced to put something back into the lower leagues.

At present, the trickle down of cash to the lower leagues is minimal, this system would arguably widen the spread of income around the pyramid.

Simple Plan:

THE REAL FA CUP NEW FA CUP



1st Round - Effectively the Qualifying Round, to even up the numbers - There are usually about 600 clubs below the Blue Square leagues who enter the FA Cup so the lowest will play-off to whittle down to 384.

2nd Round - 384 NL Clubs

3rd Round - 192 NL Clubs

4th Round - 256 Football Clubs (96 NL Clubs from 3rd Round, 68 Blue Square Clubs + 92 League Clubs)

5th Round - 128 Clubs

6th Round - 64 Clubs

7th Round - 32 Clubs

8th Round - 16 Clubs

QF - 8 Clubs

SF - 4 Clubs

Final - 2 Clubs

*Couldn't let this pass without commending Wigan, they pretty much sacrificed their league status for Cup glory. TOP NOTCH. Time won't pay much heed to their league position in 2012-13, their 'honours' section, though, will say "FA CUP WINNERS", you can't take that away.