

## Grounds for divorce

At our most recent Lewes board meeting one of the items on the agenda was the forthcoming Ground Grading inspection. This joy of joys takes place every 3 years and determines whether, if results dictate, we can be promoted. In recent years, some of the results of these grading inspections around the Non Leagues have been “interesting” to say the least. But just because a club can prove it can host big games, it doesn’t mean it is allowed to.

I’m sure many people’s favourites for promotion from the Ryman Premier League this season is Maidstone United. Last season they gained promotion via the play-offs, being able to bolster their squad with players like ex-Chelsea and West Ham full back Jon Harley. The reason why they could afford to invest in their squad was in part thanks to the installation of their 4G pitch at the Gallagher Stadium that opened a year ago. Last season, when every other Non League club saw game after game postponed, the Stones were not only able to play their games, but also hire the pitch during the rest of the week. The irony here was that during the poor weather, attendances were higher than normal as football-starved fans flocked to Maidstone for their Saturday football fix.

But what many people don’t realise is that the current grading rules mean that The Stones will not be able to take their place in the Conference, should they win promotion, because of the cash-machine known as the 4G pitch. The FA’s rules state that the pitch cannot be used in competitions featuring Premier League, Football League or Conference teams. Not only does this preclude Maidstone from promotion, but as the rules stand, they are not able to play any home FA Cup or Trophy games in rounds featuring teams from the Premier or Football leagues. So Maidstone could host a sell-out game versus Lincoln City, Stockport County or FC United of Manchester but not against Accrington Stanley or Morecambe. To take it even further to the extreme, should Maidstone win the FA Cup, they would be able to host games in the Europa League but not in the Conference South.

Compare Maidstone’s situation with their neighbours up the A249, Sittingbourne. At the end of last season, Sittingbourne took the decision to move out of their Bourne Park which was in desperate need of modernisation. They agreed a ground-share with Southern Counties East League side Woodstock Sports a few miles away. Alas, the ground-grading gremlins have already had their say, ruling that Woodstock’s Broadoak Road ground is not quite fit for Ryman League football in its current state, forcing them to the seaside for the foreseeable future to share with Whitstable Town. The irony here is that the ground is able to host FA Cup and Vase competitions, meaning that in theory Broadoak Road isn’t allowed to host Crawley Down Gatwick but it could welcome Manchester United.

Ground grading is obviously necessary to ensure that clubs moving up the leagues are able to provide a safe, secure and pleasant environment for fans, players and employees alike. But sometimes, you do wonder whether the pages relating to common sense have been torn out of the inspection manual.