

Proper Christmas football - Stuart Fuller recounts a time when matches were played on Christmas Day

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On Boxing Day we travelled down the A27 for the biggest non-league game in Sussex, as we took on Bognor Regis Town. Just like last season when the reverse fixture was our biggest crowd of the season, the fans will have flocked to see the game despite the lack of public transport.

Boxing Day football is almost always a local derby, and consequently attracts some of the biggest attendances of the season. Our biggest crowds in recent memory have come over the Christmas period – over 1,000 versus Horsham in 2011/12 and crowds double that for games against Eastbourne Borough in our Conference days. But there was a time when Christmas Day games were the norm.

Mr Fuller Snr talks fondly of getting on his new bike and cycling to Upton Park to watch West Ham on Christmas Day, and up until 1957 there was a full Football League programme on December 25th. Interest waned in subsequent years with the last ever Christmas Day game played in 1965 between Blackpool and Blackburn Rovers, although a decent crowd of over 20,000 suggested that there was still significant interest in Yuletide football.

In 1983, Brentford announced that they would be hosting Wimbledon on Christmas Day with an 11am kick off, “to revive the old tradition of husbands going to football on Christmas Day while the wives cook the turkey,” according to a Bees spokesman. But the wives thought differently and the fans’ protests in the run up to Christmas saw the match brought forward to Christmas Eve, when a 6,689 crowd, the second highest League crowd at Griffin Park that season, witnessed a 4-3 Wimbledon victory.

The Christmas Day games weren’t always without their problems. Due to a lack of local derbies, Portsmouth ended up having to travel to Blackpool back in 1954. In 1940, with the war in full swing, teams often struggled to put sides out, and players were allowed to play for more than one team, which saw Len Shackleton play for Bradford Park Avenue and Bradford City on Christmas Day. That same day was a Christmas to forget for Brighton & Hove Albion, who turned up for their game versus Norwich City with only five players! Anyone who had a pair of boots was invited to play and unsurprisingly the Seagulls suffered an 18-0 defeat.

Obviously, bad weather affects the Christmas fixtures. Last season’s game against Bognor Regis shouldn’t have finished due to the torrential rain, and we have suffered with postponements due to snow, such as the game versus Ebbsfleet United back in our Conference South days. But that pales in significance to the First Division game in 1937 between Chelsea and Charlton Athletic, when heavy fog caused the game to be abandoned. Nothing strange about that until Charlton Athletic realised their goalkeeper, the legendary Sammy Bartram, was missing. The keeper was still on the field, completely unaware that the game had been abandoned, and just assumed that Charlton were putting pressure on the Chelsea goal. Now you know why Rikki Banks wears a bright yellow outfit!