

SUPPORTING NON-LEAGUE DAY MAY ENHANCE YOUR HEALTH...

It must be about five years since I started attending non-league football; five years in which I've learnt an awful lot about the game at this level and gained an appreciation of just how little I knew of the beautiful game in the lower leagues.

I started going as I genuinely started to feel a bit embarrassed that I'd lived for fourteen years within a five minute walk of Cheshunt Football Club and yet I hadn't bothered to go to a game. I hadn't bothered because I was sure it had nothing to offer me. I was blinded by my own arrogance, I had an Arsenal season ticket and had done for years so what could I possibly get from football at non-league level?

The answer came like a bolt of lightning; I had everything to gain and the whole experience was way beyond what I'd expected. I always imagined crowds of anorak wearing geeks complete with Jack Duckworth glasses brandishing bartered old autograph books filled with the signatures of people I've never heard of!

How wrong can you be? The stadium was quirky, but I found knowledgeable supporters who knew all I knew and more, these guys knew their game, they wanted to talk football not transfer deals, they talked about players abilities not their wages. I found that just so refreshing and I still love that part of it.

It had a further twist in that it also connected with me at a playing level. It made me remember the fun of playing, remember the commitment and pain you had to put in to get the best out of it. I didn't think I could play at this level or ever could have done but it did remind me of the honesty of the level of the game I had played at. Not every tackle was met with a mock scream and a fifty forward rolls, players took the tackles as part of the game and didn't cheat at every contact. It was fantastic, and I could connect with it.

Non-league players seem to understand the fans and don't regard them as an opportunity to practice their pomposity. No phones permanently wedged in the ear, no headphones strategically placed to give the impression that they're far too important to talk to! Non-league players are a million miles away from that rubbish. Ordinary working guys who take a beer off you and buy one back, managers and coaches who actually do want to hear your opinion and shake your hand at the end of the day.

During one of my first games I sat with a pint in my hand, something not allowed in the Premiership, right by the touch line when a shuddering tackle went into the Cheshunt full back. I almost jumped myself but like the footballers I grew up watching and had played with the Cheshunt player simply winced and then got to his feet and struggled on. In that moment I knew I was watching something that was to do with me; something that I could relate to and appreciate. This was real football. The whole experience is what football is supposed to be about. The crowd are so

close to the teams and the officials and the banter is never anonymous. There is no hiding in the crowd or shouting an obscenity you don't have to own. At this level you own it all whether its good or bad its your property. I've heard banter at games like I've never heard and seen linesman and referees look across and laugh or want to punch your lights out. Its brilliant.

I'm still a season ticket holder at Arsenal but I do swap my ticket if there's a Cheshunt game I want to watch and that on its own is an amazing turn around for a higher league fan of nearly fifty years. The premier is too razzmatazz these days, its oversold and over hyped, and most importantly its completely overpriced. The cost of one class A game at the Emirates would get me into eight Cheshunt home games and if you're a football fan who wants to take the family that's a really important factor. How many families are able to afford £150 per game in tickets, and then the cost of a day's food, drink and merchandising. Its priced itself away from the average fan and non-league represents the opportunity to return the game to the working-class people who have deserted it because of the cost.

For those who think that the game will lack atmosphere and passion I'd say think again. I've jumped out of my seat at Cheshunt in the last few years and enjoyed getting behind The Ambers every bit as much as I have at Arsenal. One anecdote I never tire of recounting relates to the chairman of the club who after telling an irate opposition fan to sit and behave after he'd been delivering some questionable language was met with a quite threatening retort of 'who the hell are you'? The response 'I'm the bloody chairman now sit down'! Now you don't get that in a football league ground too often!

On the day we celebrate non-league day, which I always think should be referred to as lower league football day it's so important to get the contrast between football at a higher level and football in the lower leagues. The contrast shouldn't be measured in wealth and grandeur because to do so simply isn't fair. My club Cheshunt can't afford the levels of luxury or expansive developments of the stadia that is common place at a higher level, but its actually because of that very characteristic that it has so many other benefits. The modern football tourist fan may not get this quite so easily as the hardcore pre-premiership supporters but there's no reason that they can't understand that it is the game of football itself which provides the spectacle and not circus that goes with the higher level of the game. The feeling that you are supporting the grass roots of the game is extremely rewarding and once you've embraced it your eyes are opened to a football world where cash is king in a much more real world and where your spirit and support are much more appreciated than they'll ever be in the anonymous world of the higher league game. To put it simply buying a football shirt, a scarf and a hat at Spurs or Arsenal ensures the club has a financial position to pay Johnny Footballer £150,000 a week. Buying the same set of kit at Cheshunt helps us keep the club going and providing a football resource within the community that is there for children, and adults alike. The picture in the lower leagues is a subtler one, a more intricately built one but it is every bit as exciting as an end product and if you haven't given it a try and you love football then now's the time to put that right.

Support Non-League Day and support football in the Lower Leagues.