

SHAMATEURISM

Bob “the Cat” Bevan MBE ends his series on the history of the great amateur leagues with his personal anecdotes.

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“Do you take the Non League Paper?” I once asked the late and truly great Jimmy Hill. “Of course I do,” he replied. I had forgotten that he was President of Corinthian Casuals FC who are, to this day, the highest-placed of the true amateur clubs. Last season they only just missed out on reaching the Premier Division of the newly-named Bostik League (formerly Ryman).

“When you look at all those results pages in small print of thousands of teams,” continued Jim, “you think that each one has a dozen or more volunteers all raising money to pay some fairly ordinary footballers.”

It made me think too. About how times had changed since I saw my first ever live game – Dulwich Hamlet v Wycombe Wanderers in the Isthmian League in 1956.

As I became a fan of my local strictly amateur club how we all despised those who “cheated” by paying their players. There were even those who were critical of anyone, even legal professionals, who took the shilling for playing the beautiful game.

Nobody went quite as far as the late Alan Hardaker who once said “I wouldn’t hang a dog on the word of a professional footballer.” This not only showed a dislike for footballers but also indicated he wasn’t much of a dog lover either. More worryingly he was Secretary of the Football League.

In 1974 the Football Association finally gave up and declared everyone players so you could take money or not as you wished.

So now, over 40 years on, fans are quite happy to raise a few quid to get a better player for their team and although I, now classed as an old fart, miss the old days of the Amateur Cup, I have to admit that the standard of non league football has improved beyond all recognition.

Coaching, fitness and tactics are so much better because of the influx of money into the game which has largely been to overall benefit.

Of course, there are downsides such as the influx of major individual sponsors who treat clubs like live Subbuteo sets, piling in money, signing top players and

then departing suddenly when the toys come out of the pram. Non league history has many such stories of sides who suddenly fall through the trap door when the money stops. Hard though it is, responsible committee members should be careful of accepting such instant wealth without securing long-term commitment.

Even so this must be better than the old days when if a player left to turn professional legally he would never again be allowed to play for an amateur club.

One of the great examples was legendary cricketer Micky Stewart who was a fine amateur player with the Casuals and an England amateur international. In fact he was so good that they tried to fly him home to play in an Amateur Cup Final replay at Middlesbrough in 1956 but the plane was late and he missed the game. I did ask him who paid for the flight. He certainly didn't and neither did the club. But a supporter was the boss of a major company and apparently he is thought to have funded it.

In the same year Micky was picked for the Great Britain team in the Melbourne Olympics. In those days, the GB team was formed of the amateur sides of the four home nations. In between being picked and leaving for Down Under he took a telephone call from the secretary of the FA, Stanley Rous, who would later be knighted and become head of FIFA.

Stanley told Micky that as they had discovered he took money for playing cricket for Surrey he was not eligible for the GB team!

Unsurprisingly Micky got the hump and turned pro with Charlton, then in the old First Division. He didn't quite make it at that level and had to settle for semi-pro football in the Southern League with Guildford City never to play again for his beloved Corinthian Casuals.

What made this stance even worse was the fact that pretty well every other player in the GB squad was getting a few quid in their boots while Micky was playing for nothing and even paying subscriptions for the privilege.

In fact Micky tells me that his father had threatened to throw him out of the house if he took money while being an amateur. Not that he wasn't offered the chance. He said that if he had joined Wimbledon a match fee coupled with a job from their Chairman could have netted him £80 a week which, in these days would be equivalent to £1600! Far above legal full-timers who were on a maximum wage of £20 a week or less.

Think that's far-fetched? Billericay are said to be looking at a wage bill of £30,000 a week!

Down south Dulwich were the other club who would not pay. In 1958-59 they remarkably came second in the Isthmian League to Wimbledon who were alleged to be the biggest payers. Woking had an all-international forward line but two ended up at Wimbledon as did Les Brown, Dulwich's star player.

Les's Dad, Harry, was a Dulwich Committee Member and the story was that he refused to speak to his son after that.

In that Dulwich side was a star centre-half Dennis Joyce. He was very unlucky not to get a cap and as the 58-59 team broke up he went to Bromley who were also known for offering some "expenses".

In 1993 I spoke at the Hamlet's Centenary Dinner and at least half of the 58-59 team turned up including Dennis. I was presenting Six-O-Six on BBC Radio 5 at the time and at the end of the evening Dennis asked me to sign his menu.

"This is role reversal," I said. "I once ran across the car park to get your autograph." He said "I hope I gave it you as I could be a bit miserable in those days?" I was happy to confirm that he did. We then fell to talking about the old days and how we used to boo him when he came back to play against us with Bromley, where he was never the same player for some reason.

He confirmed that he had gone for the money and the final straw was the first game of the season at Dulwich against St Albans. "Some player raked his studs down the back of my leg" he said, "and tore one of my new socks." In those days Dulwich players had to buy their own shorts and socks.

He went to the Secretary and asked for a new pair only to be told it would cost him half a crown (12.5p). "I had a wife and two kids, was only earning five pounds a week before tax and couldn't keep forking out for new socks". So he left and went to Bromley. I wish I'd known. I wouldn't have booed him.

Around that time I was at a dinner in Manchester sitting next to Sandy Busby, son of the great Sir Matt and who ran the shop at Old Trafford at the time. We fell to talking about the old days and I must have told him that I could never get my father interested in football. I had managed to get him to a game against Kingstonian. It was 4-4 at half-time and ended 6-6. He never came again so I gave up.

Sandy listened politely to my tale and then said "I played in that game." He did too. I looked up the programme when I got home and there he was. Number six,

S.Busby. Apparently they flew him down from Manchester every week those amateurs!

There are so many tales from those days. Amateurs were not allowed to play on Sundays. It was against FA rules. So did they? Of course they did. In the late 1960s I was secretary of my Old Wilsonians FC (Southern Amateur League) sports ground and I used to let out our two magnificent full-size pitches on a Sunday morning for £800 a season. Today's equivalent £13,500.

Two of our tenants were members of a bookmakers league - Ken Munden and Jimmy Rose. Big crowds and a great deal of betting went on and I soon recognised some of the players as coming from clubs such as Enfield and Hendon. They were all playing under assumed names of course to get round the rules.

It's all changed today, of course. We are free to go and play when we like and for whom we like and for whatever money we like.

Let's end with sad news and good news.

Sad news is that the aforementioned Jimmy Rose, who loved football, as a director of Crystal Palace and later manager of Dulwich Hamlet two years before the FA made everyone a player. Until 1972 the Hamlet were struggling but when he took over it all picked up. We must assume that he paid some players at the time. I knew him and liked him but something must have gone badly wrong somewhere because, one day, alone in a hotel room, he took his own life.

Now the good news. Micky Stewart took over as President of Corinthian Casuals when Jimmy Hill became too unwell. He goes to most games and at the end of last season Casuals were due to play Greenwich Borough in the Ryman South play-off semi-final.

Micky was torn because it clashed with the Surrey County Cricket Club Annual General Meeting which he had not missed for 60 or more years. After much soul-searching he opted to watch Casuals. Surrey were distraught and called him to say they had planned to make a presentation so they moved the AGM to earlier in the day.

Micky went along. "I thought they were going to give me a tie or something."

At the end of the meeting they were all led out onto the pitch at the Oval (where in the 1950s Casuals used to play) and Micky was asked to turn and face the Members' Pavilion. They had named the stand after him. Not an emotional man

but he had tears in his eyes as he headed off to watch Casuals win 4-3. Sadly they lost the final to Dorking Wanderers.

Extra Box ?

President Micky Stewart was at the Casuals a couple of Mondays back when I joined him to watch a pre-season match with Bristol Rovers.

Rovers Chairman, Steve Hamer, is an ex-Casuals captain and manager from the 1970s and he brought them along to help Micky and the club.

He also invited seven former players from those days and presented the club with a framed team picture of his Casuals side.

Sky commentator Martin Tyler, who doubles up as assistant coach at National South Hampton & Richmond, is another ex-Casual and he too turned up for the game.

Casuals have lost eight of last season's successful team. Nothing new at this club who don't even pay expenses. So it was a surprise to see how well this almost new side played. They beat Bristol Rovers under 23s 3-1 and did so in style. Josh Uzun scored two penalties and a superb free-kick and was unlucky not to get another spot kick.

Will he and the others be there for the season? Will he be there at the start? One thing is for sure Micky and his fellow officials will be because they love the game so much. There is no other reason for them to be there.