

LOFT AGM 13/12/12: Vice Chair's Report

Welcome to the 2012 AGM, and we hope you all enjoy the q&a session with Russell Slade that will follow the formalities.

I'm giving the review statement this year because our chairman, Doug Harper, has had a rotten year having cancer treatment, and still isn't recovered sufficiently to be with us tonight. I'm sure I speak for all of us in wishing Doug a speedy return to full health, although whether a full regrowth of his old, messy tramp's haircut would be equally as welcome is open to question.

My thanks go to Matt Porter for allowing us to use The Gallery Bar as our venue, and for arranging our speaker. Without question I feel we can take the credit for recent results: our invitation to the manager to address this meeting, which was issued a couple of months back, has clearly injected the necessary urgency and desire into the playing staff and management that has set the team off on an 8 match winning run! I jest, but it's uncanny how often a meet the manager event is preceded by an upturn in results: maybe we should insist on at least 3 meetings a season so that automatic promotion would be a shoe-in! You'll no doubt have the chance to ask him later about 4-4-2, 4-5-1, diamonds, wingers, attacking play, negative tactics, the enigma that is Jimmy Smith, what went wrong with Cureton, and - of course - our very, very, very short memories.

Last year Barry Hearn was here to answer fans' questions, and obviously there's been plenty of developments off the pitch in regard to the future location of the club, including a complete change of heart from our Club Chairman regarding LONDON Orient at the Olympic Stadium.

With the LLDC confirmation of West Ham as preferred bidder for the Stadium last week, plus the summary dismissal of Orient's bid for tenancy on the grounds of what finance we can bring to the table (ie none), this matter is clearly in the news and at the forefront of both LOFT and general supporters thoughts as we await the next developments. We've noted Barry's subsequent statement about still seeking a groundshare with West Ham at the Olympic Stadium, but will wait until the dust has settled and we've heard what else he has to say at the planned January meeting at The Supporters Club, just in case he comes up with yet another cunning plan.

All I want to add at this stage is that LOFT has consistently argued that the Olympic Stadium is not really fit for watching football, and that the original plan to re-figure it for athletics, concerts and community events remains, in our view, by far the cheapest and most sensible option for both taxpayers and the supporters of both football clubs involved.

We'd like to reiterate our keenness to see the fabled consultants report commissioned by the club that concluded Orient couldn't hope to survive at Brisbane Road if West Ham did move to the Olympic Stadium. We accept that it is difficult to break-even on our usual turnover, and the mooted discounted tickets by The Hammers to fill the OS could prove a challenge, but are not at all convinced this automatically means the end of our club in E10.

I think it's also important to note that of all the fans that expressed a preference concerning the 3 options for future location (whether via LOFT, the Supporters Club, the fanzines and an online message board poll), at the very least 60% want us to remain at Brisbane Road, with at most 20% preferring the Olympic Stadium and the remaining 20% opting for an "elsewhere" relocation (the LOFT poll of all members showed an even more emphatic 4:1

in favour of staying Brisbane Road as the preferred option): but we fully agree here with Mr Hearn that this "Harlow or Fairlop Orient" elsewhere option is currently a completely unrealistic non-starter due to our lack of financial assets and dearth of potential property development partners - even before you consider FA and League rules and MK Franchise-type issues.

Moving on, it is important to restate LOFT's core aim. Which is to maximise the involvement and ownership of fans in football clubs. At Orient, the fans: via LOFT; individual shareholdings; and - by far the largest block - the supporters club, owns about 5% of the club's shares. David Dodd, the Supporters Club chair, has sat on the Orient board for a long time, but clearly with the chairman controlling about 80% of the shares we are at the mercy of his vision and decisions.

We note that at lower levels more club's are becoming fan owned - but normally that's triggered because it's the last remaining option after terrible owners have left a mess...a criticism that, whatever your views, can't readily be lobbed at Barry Hearn... and we wish Pompey Supporters Trust all the best in their efforts to take control of Portsmouth: which would be the biggest fans-owned club by far in England should they be able to pull it off.

With the club CEO, Matt Porter, being a long term fan who started out on The North Terrace whilst compiling the Wagon Train fanzine, we feel we have another voice at the top table who is sympathetic to supporters concerns - albeit that he is a Matchroom employee these days - who is always prepared to listen and engage with fans. The occasional fans forums have been useful sounding boards for ideas and constructive criticism, and LOFT hopes they both continue and become more regular.

There's obviously a couple of campaigns that we are keen to see the club embrace further.

The first is safe-standing, which we feel would both address fans' longstanding wishes for a terrace option to return, as well as make us a more attractive option for fans of our neighbouring Big Clubs who are fed up with sterile matchday experiences, being messed about with kick off times at the mercy of Sky's TV schedules, and skyhigh prices. If Orient want to attract more spectators, and hopefully convert them into longer term Os fans, having safe standing as a USP on our side of the capital would be an obvious way to differentiate us, just as it is for Brentford in West London.

The second is cheap season tickets for youths, students and young workers who don't want to (or can't) come with parents. At whatever price level it's set, or however you get round making sure you can sell the maximum number of day tickets for big-gate games, it's imperative for the club to attract and retain newer, younger supporters wherever our ground is located.

Other match day issues, such as stewarding, cash turnstiles, the ticket office, stadium food outlets, have - in my view - improved markedly the last couple seasons, and we offer praise to the club for currently lowering matchday prices in the light of falling attendences at Orient and across the lower leagues. That doesn't mean there's no room for more improvement on these issues still, but credit to Matt and the club where it's due.

LOFT has continued to attend, where possible, events organised by Supporters Direct and the Football Supporters Federation. For instance, Mike Randall attended an FSF meeting with the police about policing games earlier this year, and Tom Davies was at the SD/FSF fans day in the summer. We also liaise with the media and politicians at all levels to put

across our views, ranging from lobbying the Mayor of London via the local Assembly member, to supporting the Walthamstow MP's campaign, via Supporters Direct, against loan sharks like Wonga - who have targetted football clubs and fans to promote their scandalously priced products.

In terms of communications, LOFT engages with members and other Orient supporters across a range of social media, including facebook, twitter and the message board. This is in addition to our yahoo members email group and announcements and feedback capabilities via our own website. However, this is an area where we are always looking to improve, and like last year, would still welcome any input from LOFT's members to help us get better in this area.

We are also pleased to have the continued support of both fanzines, both of whom printed articles and included recruitment leaflets at the time of our Spring leafletting day, and thank them for that.

We also continue to liase with the Supporters Club over various issues - personally speaking, I'd ideally like to see both entities work together more and maybe even merge - but realise that currently the Supporters Club concentrates mostly on running the excellent social club and is constitutionally barred from getting too involved in matters of off-field administration and management.

No LOFT committee members are standing down voluntarily this year - you always have the option to kick any of us out, of course - but we'd welcome members putting themselves forward: organisations like ours need regular injections of new blood to stay vital and representative.

Member numbers remain pretty stable but disappointingly low considering the looming issues threatening both the location and future wellbeing of our football club. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised: Supporters Direct estimates most Fans Trusts operating at clubs not facing immediate extinction, like ours, hover at around the 10% of regular fanbase mark, but at only £1 minimum joining fee I'd like to think we could reach out further and become representative of more of our fans. Maybe we aren't always visible enough to attract new members and debate issues with more sceptical or disinterested supporters - but without a steady stream of volunteers to leaflet the turnstiles or man a LOFT matchday presence it becomes impossible, and downright unappealing, for just one or two of us to commit to being outside the ground every game.

We remain the sponsors this season of Theo's Gang, as we believe it important for the club to attract kids, and have some involvement in LOASS - the local community soccer club which was named 2012 London Community Club of the Year, that in turn has associations with Leyton Orient Community Sports Program. We have added a very small number to our Orient shareholding this year, but generally don't see the point of increasing that stake at a time when the Chairman controls the vast majority of equity and any investment wouldn't go to the club.

We have discussed before whether to start a "fighting fund", either in cash or pledges, so that we are best prepared to act if it became necessary in a crisis - or the Chairman came over all faint and decided to gift the club to its fans! We may well arrange a meeting - or at least an online discussion via our email group - about this in the new year, to gauge members current views and ideas and levels of enthusiasm.

So, that's it from me. I'm happy to take any questions on anything other than LOFT finances, which the Treasurer can address after his report - but if there are none at this point, I hope you all enjoy the rest of the evening.