

## LOFT AGM : Committee Report to Members

A very warm welcome to the Leyton Orient Fans' Trust AGM. And a big welcome back to Doug Harper, our chairman, after illness meant he had to miss last season's meeting. We're holding the AGM a bit later in the season than usual, as a result of trying to match up a date for venue and guest speaker availability. But we'll be running to our usual schedule: Reports and official LOFT matters first with questions invited from the floor; then a short break; followed by the Q&A session with Orient legend John Sitton - who will no doubt talk about his playing career and successful playoff campaign, his time as manager, as well as give us some insight into his current thoughts & activities.

We'd like to thank the Supporters Club for providing the venue and their ever-excellent bar service. If you're not an LOSC members right now, I'd encourage you to join.

LOFT doesn't usually get too involved in discussing what happens on the pitch - whether it's bad or good - as we're more focused on the Club's financial management, ownership, and relations with supporters rather than the coaching side of things. But first tonight, it would be remiss not to acknowledge what a fantastic season Leyton Orient has had on the pitch. To be assured of a play-off spot before Easter with the sort of budget the club has is a massive achievement in itself. So well done to Russell Slade, the players and all the other staff who have contributed to this progression.

There's been plenty of off-pitch developments too.

The main issue casting a cloud over the club has been the drawn-out Olympic Stadium issue. We share some of the concerns of the Club about the *possible* longer-term impact of West Ham moving into a bigger stadium that is even closer to us. But we are generally relieved that Barry Hearn's efforts to sell up at Brisbane Road and groundshare with the Hammers has hit the buffers.

Although there is obviously not universal agreement amongst Orient fans, our survey of LOFT members was pretty much in line with all the other feedback off O's supporters: from all the evidence and realistic options to hand it's pretty clear the majority would rather the Club stay where it is, and try to attract extra matchday support from Hammers and other Premier League club fans who have already been priced out by the frankly ridiculous top tier ticket costs, plus those Irons that aren't at all keen on their impending move.

After all, despite our great season and free ticket initiatives we are rarely filling the home stands at Brisbane Road, and unless something was to change - such as funding support from an even *richer* benefactor - our current ground is plenty big enough for our needs and budget. Plus it provides the sort of matchday experience that the type of fans we attract come to prefer over the overpriced Premier League juggernaut.

There is still the Club's pending 2nd appeal to the Premier League challenging West Ham moving closer, but we see no *new* reasons why the PL or other authorities will reverse earlier decisions, and we'd urge Barry Hearn to stop spending any more money on lawyers now and concentrate more on how we can make the most of Leyton Orient in E10.

LOFT still has concerns about the Club posting its usual annual losses, and the fact we are no longer virtual freeholders of our own stadium.

To be fair, we understand what Barry did to write off earlier loans and provide a short term cash injection into Orient. But that cash has now gone and the club has no more assets to sell. However, whilst he remains as majority owner with a renewed enthusiasm we are not overly worried that he won't somehow find the means to cover the shortfalls - that *he allows* the club to continue to budget for - especially if the Financial Fair Play Rules take hold.

But we need to keep an eye on his continuing enthusiasm for Orient - it costs him money and we know he hates losing it, watching out for any growth in debts or loans to Matchroom or elsewhere, and thinking about what will happen should he ever decide he's finally had enough.

One of the things LOFT has been investigating this year is getting Brisbane Road designated an Asset Of Community Value. Quite a few supporters groups at other clubs have done this. What it effectively means is that if the owner of a ground or any other prized community facility wants to sell up they have to announce their intentions in advance and give interested parties - like the clubs fans - at least 6 months to come in and make an offer.

To be honest it's more of a symbolic gesture to have the ACV on Brisbane Road at this stage, but you never know what us fans might be able to come up with in a crunch situation. If clubs like Pompey can buy their club and its assets - joining others like Exeter and Wimbledon in being fan-owned - there's no reason to say something similar is impossible at Orient.

LOFT continues to sponsor Theo's Gang, where our Wyvern and his team does so much good work to engage and attract younger fans, and this year we have also provided shirt sponsorship for 2 local community football clubs: the newly reformed LOFT FC and Birkbeck Orient. I believe both have had a decent season themselves and we wish them well.

Our membership numbers have dipped somewhat from a high point when fans concerns about the Ground Sale to Matchroom was first known, but it's relatively stable. Although many members use our website sign-up and membership fee payment facility, we realise that some fans would prefer to hand over cash - especially small amounts like a quid or two - so we have re-started being visible at the ground again on a Saturday matchday. A few volunteers to take turns doing this next season would be most welcome.

We are also in discussion with LOFT members at the Supporters Club, and Matt Porter at the football club, about maybe using their facilities to store or mail out LOFT membership forms in order to reach as many fans as possible for the minimum cost. Doing our own mail outs is not a cheap business any more, and so if there's anybody here who hasn't given us an up to date email address please take a moment to do that now with the membership secretary.

No doubt we could always get better with our communications, but we have made a big effort to use various social media: like our website, the LOFTlist email group, Facebook, Twitter and the message boards, to communicate and engage with as many members and other Orient fans as possible without having to buy too many stamps or post out snailmail.

In more general terms LOFT remains active in both Supporters Direct and the Football Supporters Federation, attending meetings when we can and getting involved in their campaigns. One of those recently was the FSF's ongoing safe standing campaign, where we were pleased to see Orient finally declare it was no longer totally opposed to safe standing developments and experiments at Football League grounds in the future. That doesn't mean rail seat systems will be making an appearance at Brisbane Road anytime soon, but at least when it finally comes to redeveloping bits of the ground, like the East Stand maybe, safe standing and most supporters preference to be given a choice will at least be considered.

Communications between LOFT and the Football Club remain very good. We see our current role as a critical friend that ensures fans views, ideas and concerns are heard by the right people. The development of the Fans Forum in conjunction with adoption of a Supporters Liaison Officer role at the club has seen another improvement in this regard. It helps that the SLO and Club CEO, Matt Porter, is a longstanding Orient fan, and that goes for some of the other staff at the Club, and hopefully you've all seen our pre-Forum requests for input from fans and our reports issued on the matters discussed afterwards. If you haven't, these reports are still available on our website news archive, as is nearly every other communication and opinion piece from the committee.

Now if you don't think your voice is being heard, then please let us know - or even better, why not stand for the committee yourself. Fresh faces and ideas are always welcome.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the meeting and can do your bit to spread the word about the work LOFT does. Remember: the more members Trusts have the more the Clubs and football authorities have to take notice of us as an *independent* voice for supporters needs and wishes. Because without its fans professional football is nothing.

James Cassidy, LOFT Committee, 14/4/14