

The Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Response by David Collins

To: CELG Committee

From: David Collins, Editor, *Welsh Football*

I wish to submit the following views to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee inquiry into the Welsh Premier League.

I write as editor of *Welsh Football* magazine, the unofficial national football magazine of Wales. This has been continuously produced since 1991 by football enthusiasts, as a not-for-profit publication, to ensure that our nation has a national magazine to match the independent status of Wales in football. One of our primary focuses is the Welsh Premier League and the domestic structure below it.

I am not a professional journalist, nor have I worked in sports administration. However, I have watched a large amount of Welsh Premier football over its twenty year existence and I am in no doubt that the standard of play and the spectator facilities have improved beyond recognition. Today we have a competition which bears comparison with the Football Conference in England – yet has a far lower profile even in Wales and attracts less public attention, including attendances.

Indeed, the single biggest problem the league still has is its public perception: incongruously, despite the national pride in Wales as a nation displayed in so many walks of life, rather than celebrate the fact that we have our own league and cup competitions enabling our clubs to represent their country in UEFA competition, the wider public and press attitude to our national league is often a mixture of embarrassment and disinterest.

This attitude contrasts strongly with many other smaller nations in Europe - and also with attitudes to Welsh rugby clubs and competitions.

Whilst I do not necessarily support everything the FAW has done – and I certainly believe it could do more – I do feel that the creation of the national league, and the more recent decision to reduce its size to focus resources on a smaller number of clubs with strong infrastructures including youth systems, are both moves which have benefitted Welsh football and, if properly nurtured, can continue to do so into the future.

However, it is also clear to me that playing standards and attendances have reached a plateau which is unlikely to be improved upon without more radical initiatives by the FAW with the essential support of the Welsh Assembly Government.

Recently the FAW spent considerable time attempting to persuade UEFA to allow the nomination of clubs playing in English Leagues as participants in UEFA competitions, via the Welsh Cup. Arguably, this might have had a wider benefit for the Welsh Premier clubs in the longer term, through better results and improved country seeding coefficients, if Swansea City and Cardiff City had represented Wales. But as UEFA has ruled clearly that this is out of the question, the FAW must now forget about appeasing these clubs and concentrate all its efforts instead on its own domestic clubs.

Inevitably the key to progress will be funding. To an extent the FAW needs to divert more of its national sponsorship and revenue into domestic soccer, but that can only ever be part of a solution. To attract the sort of sponsorship required to make the next step in playing standards requires two parallel initiatives: an imaginative approach to competition structure for our premier domestic clubs, and a concerted attempt to raise the WPL's media profile. Each of these is discussed below:

Competition Structure

Much has been written over recent years about "Summer Football" for the WPL. Some people argue this was successful in the Republic of Ireland, though that is actually debatable. However, simply changing the dates of the WPL season without fixing any of the other funding and structural issues will make no difference whatever. We would end up with a league with the same playing standard, that is still largely ignored by tv, press and public, with low attendances – and in addition it would have been virtually disconnected from the rest of domestic Welsh football, making it even harder for progressive clubs to emerge and gain promotion to the elite.

The summer football lobby argues that Welsh clubs are disadvantaged in UEFA competition in July as the season has not started here, unlike Scandinavia. This may be true, and the objective of ensuring our teams are match-fit by early July should be kept in mind when seeking new competitive structures for our clubs.

The reduced WPL, of 12 clubs, is a valid part of the solution but on its own will not generate the wider interest that we need. Rather than continue to tinker with its format, the FAW should seek to create some additional variety and prize / sponsorship revenue for the 12 elite clubs by striving for new competitions that do not simply involve the Welsh clubs all playing each other over and over again. We should bear in mind that Welsh rugby wouldn't be very inspiring if the regions didn't have other opposition to play against. Football and rugby structures are different, but the principle of a wider, higher profile element to the season is worth borrowing from rugby in the search for a new direction in football.

So, taking these ideas of (1) looking for competitive football in early summer and (2) seeking to create sponsored high profile competition with different opposition, ideas need to be explored, moving the domestic season to wherever in the calendar it fits best. For instance, two of the many models possible might be:

- The WPL to play eleven rounds of matches only (removing the second phase) from September / October through to Spring, then the top Welsh clubs (six ?) playing in some form of new international competition with clubs from countries like Ireland and the nearer Scandinavians prior to their summer seasons
- An international competition being designed for the autumn, after the Irish and Scandinavian clubs have finished their seasons, with the Welsh Premier League starting much later, even after New Year, and running until June.

In the above models, while the six top WPL clubs would enter a new sponsored tournament, the lower six could compete in a domestic tournament with top clubs from the WPL's two feeder leagues, thus providing variety of opposition and strengthening the engagement with the rest of the Welsh pyramid system.

I must stress that neither of the above is a fully formed proposal. They are offered as rough ideas of the type of imaginative thinking that is required to move the game to the next level in Wales. The source of opposition need not be Irish, nor northern European. Indeed there is no reason why it could not be English, if the right timing and structure could be found. The key will be finding a competition against clubs / associations similarly interested in new directions, and which can capture the imagination of sponsors and broadcasters initially. If necessary to 'prime the pump' FAW and WAG funding should be used, though this cannot be the complete answer even in the short term.

Media Coverage

The Welsh Premier League receives limited and poor media coverage, with some notable exceptions, including S4C and the Liverpool Daily Post. However, the 'mainstream' media, including especially the main tv channels, continue to ignore the national league. The effect of this phenomenon on awareness and perception in the wider public should not be underestimated.

Consider this example: the BBC magazine programme Wales Today, broadcast daily and watched by a high proportion of the population, contains a round up of the weekend's and previous day's football. It regularly features Cardiff City and Swansea City (rightly, as public interest in these clubs is high, although on the other hand they are widely covered elsewhere anyway); but it also regularly covers the fortunes of Newport County and Wrexham, clubs which play in level 5 of English football and on a par in standard with the Welsh Premier. At the same time the Welsh Premier action is **never** previewed or rounded-up. The effect on public perception is obvious – awareness of Wrexham and Newport's fortunes is raised, but not the Welsh Premier – and the subliminal message is that only

English football is worthy of interest, the domestic version of too poor quality. An odd position for a proud Welsh broadcaster, surely ? The same applies to ITV Wales, of course.

Highlights of Welsh football appear on an excellent S4C programme, but not until late on a Monday night. Other small nations have football highlights and magazine programmes broadcast on mainstream channels, and sooner after games are played. Why not in Wales ?

In changing this situation I am sure the WAG can play a part. Our broadcasters and newspapers need to be rallied to the cause of advancing and promoting our own Welsh football, and I am sure politicians and administrators can bring influence to bear if they choose to: either behind the scenes by way of encouragement or incentive; or overtly by publicly shaming the media's obsession with English football on this point.

Finally, as an ardent supporter of domestic football in Wales, I wish you success in your review and would be glad to offer further views on any matter if required.

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