

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Response from Mel ap Ior Thomas

I run a results and stats service, Soccerfile Wales, freelance for the Welsh Premier League and have done so since the outset in 1992. I also supply the Press Association with data as well as covering Wales for the German Kicker Sportmagazin. I also do features on request for the prestigious World Soccer magazine and supply UEFA's European Football Yearbook with the copy and stats for Wales. My data is used on websites world wide.

I have produced three books "African Football Handbook" in 1988 – the first to cover the continent - a Welsh Football Almanac in 1991 with Adrian Dumphy and Dave Collins and "History of the Cambrian Coast League" in 2009. I have also compiled various media guides for the WPL and am editor of the League's weekly Welsh Premier Times.

Having been involved with the Welsh Premier League since its inception in 1992 I believe I am in a good position to assess the progress made during the last twenty years.

These can be split into five different categories. Format, Media, Stadia, Playing Standards and Youth Development

League Format

Initially the League adopted a twenty club membership made up of an equal split between North and South. In this respect it should be noted that the North included Mid-Wales except for Aberystwyth Town who were members of the southern Welsh League.

Gradually the League came down to eighteen which was then the norm for most European Leagues. In 2010 a major structural change was implemented by the FAW forcing the League down to twelve clubs. After consideration the current format was adopted whereby the clubs play each other twice in the First Phase – totalling 22 matches each – before splitting into two groups for the Second Phase. These are formed from the top six – the Championship Conference – and the bottom six – forming the Play-off Conference. The playing records are carried forward from the First Phase. This provides a further 10 matches each.

The top club of the Play-off Conference, and possibly second placed club depending on circumstance, qualify with clubs finishing third to sixth in the Championship for the Europa League Play-offs. The winner takes the League's second UEFA League spot.

The two stages during the season have so far created an air of competitiveness throughout the season compared with a straight August to April run through.

This season's title, as with last season, was won on the last round of fixtures; likewise the relegation issues.

Some clubs have complained that they play each other too often but with only 12 clubs in the league it is impossible to get away from this. A straight round-robin would see all clubs playing each other four times giving 44 matches per season – far too heavy a burden for wet Wales' grass pitches.

Matters are compounded by the League Cup where clubs could meet again a couple of times but this could be alleviated by either:

- Inviting the top two from the feeder Leagues to take part
- Seeding the draw so that at least in the early rounds matches are between clubs from separate conferences. The League Cup starts after the First Phase has finished

This is inevitably going to remain a problem unless the League is increased to sixteen which is highly unlikely at present. If it was then a straight forward season of 30 matches could still end with play-offs as occur in Holland and Belgium for example.

Media

This section can be broken into sub categories:

i. Television

a. Match transmission

The current coverage supplied by Rondo Media and S4/C is the best ever achieved by the League and reaches an extremely high standard. Let us hope it continues

b. TV News coverage

The word that springs to mind is abysmal. The BBC's Wales Today will not give a minute to the WPL. On approach they say that sufficient time is given to football which in their mind is coverage of clubs playing in England. This must be the next target for media improvement, even 15seconds on a Friday evening showing a caption of the weekend's fixtures would be quite acceptable.

ii. Newspaper coverage

In the north the Daily Post gives excellent coverage with their website blog by Dave Jones adding to the print contribution.

However in the south the so-called national newspaper of Wales must I suppose pander to their main readership in the valley areas which from a football point of view concentrates on Cardiff City – a club rebuked by the FAW last year for making derogatory remarks about the League over the tannoy system.

This brings into focus the true struggle facing the WPL in the future – English football.

The FAW's failure to create a national league much earlier in their history has allowed the influence of the game over the dyke to expand beyond control. This leaves the WPL with an uphill battle to gain support and increase attendances. The only option I can see is to persuade fans of clubs like Liverpool, Manchester United etc to adopt a second club in their own country with incentives to visit their nearest WPL club - reductions for season ticket holders for example.

Engaging these fans will hopefully then lead to some twinning of clubs perhaps; it is done elsewhere.

Imagination and initiative is needed if we are to increase attendances. Clubs that talk of returning to England – as Anne Jones' Rhyl have done - should realise that as far as football is concerned Wales is an independent country and if a League had been formed earlier in the FAW's history the clubs playing in England would not be there at all. To those clubs that want to move to England I would say come into the real world. You are in Wales and that is where your future lies.

As mentioned Wales is independent in the world of football but that is a fragile position within FIFA. FIFA's criteria for membership states that

“Any association which is responsible for organising and supervising football in its country may become a member of FIFA. In this context, the expression ‘country’ shall refer to an independent state recognised by the international community.”

Clearly Wales does not fall into this category and its membership is a privileged one based on the creation of the International Football Association Board

IFAB is made up of representatives from each of the United Kingdom's pioneering football associations - The FA, the Scottish Football Association, Football Association of Wales and Northern Ireland's Irish Football Association – and FIFA, the international governing body for football.

Each UK association has one vote and FIFA has four. IFAB deliberations must be approved by three-quarters of the vote, which translates to at least six votes. Thus, FIFA's approval is necessary for any IFAB decision, but FIFA alone cannot change the Laws of the Game— they need to be agreed by at least two of the UK members. There is also a quorum requirement that at least four of the five member associations, one of which must be FIFA, have to be present for a meeting to proceed.

The Board meets twice a year, once to decide on possible changes to the rules governing the game of Football and once to deliberate on its internal affairs. The first meeting is called the Annual General Meeting (AGM) and the second is the Annual Business Meeting (ABM). Four weeks before the AGM, the member associations must send their written proposals to the secretary of the host association. FIFA then prints a list of suggestions that are distributed to all other associations for examination. The AGM is held either in February or March and the ABM is held between September and October.

Wales' membership of this organisation and of FIFA is as a result of the four home nations' historic status as the founders of the organised game.

Politically this is becoming less stable. Moves have been made in the past by Asian and African FIFA members to try and overturn this privilege and was one of the reasons that the late Alun Evans set up the WPL – to publicise our identity to the world.

It is important that we maintain this identity at all costs. This has not been made easy of late with the English FA grabbing headlines – and little support – for a challenge on the FIFA Council. Couple this with Scotland's possible, or even probable, political independence then our position becomes even more precarious.

Challenges to our position will become easier with only three countries in the UK.

It is therefore important that the WAG recognises this and that Welsh football is looking to them to support – without conditions – this independent status and that it does nothing to undermine the status quo.

Stadia

Massive strides have been taken to improve facilities at grounds over the last twenty years and the clubs have worked extremely hard to take their stadiums up to and beyond Domestic Licence requirements.

Raising the required funding has taken great effort and with FAW funding targets have been reached.

However, the stadia improvements have in many cases not been matched at the same pace for playing surface quality. Clubs still suffer from poor drainage and for the standard of football to improve a major hike in surface quality has to be prioritised.

Newtown and Prestatyn Town have recently explored using UEFA standard synthetic pitches as currently used by The New Saints. This of course is also a commercially based move but provides an all-weather surface that copes easily with the oft horrendous Welsh weather.

This is where the Welsh Assembly Government can help with both funding to help the move to synthetics and with grant aid to employ specialist consultants to advise on drainage and turf quality for clubs wishing to remain with the traditional grass.

In the case of synthetic pitches the link clubs will forge with the local community for additional use will surely fall under some funded community aid project at the WAG.

Playing standards and Youth Development

There has in my personal opinion been a vast improvement in playing standards with more WPL players moving to higher levels both in the UK and abroad.

For example Geoff Kellaway of Aberystwyth Town has played for Australian A-League side Melbourne Victory and a number of players have played in Finland during their summer season

To continue this improvement it is important that clubs look to the future by nurturing their own talent. As part of the Domestic and UEFA Licensing criteria all clubs must have a fully operational Academy and these get financial help from UEFA itself.

Running an Academy is a costly business and this is where the WAG can I believe help via its Coaching and Leadership initiative and via Sport Wales

In times of economic strain it is essential that young players are brought into the game at club level both from a social point of view and to enable the clubs to plan ahead.

Conclusion

The Welsh Premier League is our nation's flagship football competition but its growth is stunted by lack of funding.

The FAW have over recent years increased its support but unlike clubs in England very little other financial support is forthcoming. In England the Football Foundation, funded by the Premier League, The FA, Sport England and Government, support football at all levels.

Note that the Premier League is one of the partners involved. Their contribution comes from massive deals for TV coverage. Coverage available to Welsh customers of the pay-per-view channels but none of the revenue is passed on to Welsh football.

The WAG could break new ground here by questioning the fairness of this and approaching the powers involved that a percentage of this revenue should be made available to Welsh football.

Note also that the **UK** government gives money to football in England, but does not financially support the game in Wales. This must be queried

Despite what you may hear from supporters of the rugby code, Association Football is, from a participation and support point of view, the national sport of Wales. Let's treat it as such and I would ask the WAG to do its bit in supporting our Premier League.