

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF YOUTH FOOTBALL LEAGUES A POTTED HISTORY

The National Association of Youth Football Leagues (NAYFL) was born out of the famous, or from the FA (FA) point of view, infamous, demonstration outside Lancaster Gate in early 1995.

The event that prompted this show of strength, solidarity and dismay of youth leagues around England was the decision by the FA, within a couple of months, to dispense with Under 10 age groups at full side. There had been no warning, discussion, consultation and most importantly no forwarding planning in reaching this decision.

The FA knew quickly it had made a serious miscalculation and error and not only received severe criticism from within its own ranks from the Counties, but had disturbed a sleeping giant, the youth football leagues and clubs of England. Hitherto having been sadly neglected in all FA. Planning with their strange and antiquated views that all youth football worth considering lay within schools and that schools diminishing participation was the future of English Football. Born out of that demonstration, which saw myself, former Bexley League Chairman (now Chairman of the London FA. Youth Council), Brian Miller and two others being invited in to meet Terry Venables and to air our grievances, was the NAYFL.

Most of the original participants have moved on and I became involved late 1995, taking on Chairman in 1996 when the first Annual General Meeting was held at a hotel near Heathrow. Some dozen youth Leagues attended. The idea was obviously going to be a long, hard struggle and realistically there is still a long way to go. The NAYFL. was invited several times to meet with FA Officers, most importantly Robin Russell the Technical Coordinator. It was the same Robin Russell who had declared at a London Youth.FA. Consultative Meeting 'the FA. made a foul up' (words changed), when describing the intended changes to u10's in 1995.

In 1997 new inroads were made in the Birmingham area and the second AGM. was held there, as much as any other reason being central to the whole country.

About this time Peter Coulter, Life President of the Bexley League came out of 'retirement' and took on the role of Secretary. Things really started to move with Peter at the helm and the by the time we held the 1998 AGM. at Villa Park, home of Aston Villa, we not only had a full house, but John McDermott the newly appointed FA Development Officer addressed the meeting.

Paul Tompkins, later to be NAYFL Secretary made his debut at this meeting as Child Protection Officer and was a valued member. Shortly after this the FA cooled on the NAYFL, not liking any other national association other than their own and invitations to Lancaster Gate ceased. The NAYFL moved on and attracted a strong following in the West Country, Yorkshire and Lancashire. It was the Mid Warwicks League who hosted in 1999 AGM. in the fair town of Leamington Spa. Not well attended and not a success, with too many divisions amongst those running the Association, I am sad to say, and I truly feared for its future.

Year 2,000 WAS a success, thanks greatly to a super League from the north, the Sheffield Boys, whose stature and size is similar to that of the Tandridge and Bexley. This AGM. was held at Barnsley F. C.

We were now 60 Leagues strong stretching from Cornwall to the North East and half the Leagues were present. The meeting was long, informative and thanks to the Sheffield League, superbly managed.

Both Peter Coulter and I called it a day. I personally felt that 5 years tenure as Chairman was long enough, that I was unable to devote as much time as I would have wished to promote the Association and that a new man with new ideas would be of benefit. The management now shifted northwards with Ian Brown of the Harrogate Youth League taking over as Secretary, Adrian Exley from Garforth Youth League as Treasurer and Dennis Banner from the Chad Mansfield League in Nottingham taking on my role as Chairman. I asked and received a vote of thanks for Peter Coulter, whose industry, ability and hard work kept the NAYFL alive and expanding.

A year later (2001) we were at Cheltenham.F.C. and Tony Pickerin, the Head of FA Child Protection addressed the meeting. This was recognition from the FA of not only of our existence, but that we were and are a viable organisation in the development and progress of youth football. Tamworth in the midlands was our next venue in 2002 and this time the FA National Club Development Manager, Les Howie, addressed member clubs. 'League Charter Standards' was discussed at length and following this meeting Les regularly called upon members of the NAYFL

for discussions on youth football, notably Alan Clarke, Paul Tompkins, Terry Williams & Sally Dolan.

The following year we were in Blackburn, Lancashire and David Hodgson of the Accrington Youth League was our host and stood in place of Alan Clarke. Paul Tompkins took over as Secretary and I was proud to be nominated as President. CRB. checks, Standard Codes of Rules & 'Mini Soccer' were the main items of consultation and discussion. Terry Williams from Oxford came on as Vice Chairman and has since taken over the role of Secretary, Paul Tompkins standing down. In 2004 Guild & Shere League hosted our AGM. at Guildford University, the theme being 'Where do we go from here'. This is often a discussion point, as the success of our campaigns and our involvement has certainly meant we often question ourselves of the need for our existence.

Our members attending the AGM. have repeatedly urged the Association to survive and grow. Some feel let down by the information coming from their County Associations. Others have stressed the need to have a discussion forum for youth leagues. Most of us like to meet and discuss problems with friends from Leagues around the country.

2005 should again be an interesting AGM. Our active Treasurer, Adrian Exley will host us at Ossett Town.F.C. in his native Yorkshire. David Hodgson will be standing down as Chairman due to ill health and Paul Tompkins will also be lost to the NAYFL Terry Williams will continue in the Secretary role.

There is much to be done, I would consider 100 youth Leagues the target and this is obtainable.

One aspect has, I believed, slowed the growth of the NAYFL and that is there is little to complain about at the moment! The NAYFL was born out of adversity and in 1995 everyone wanted to rush to the colours and air their grievances and there was no vehicle at the time for doing so.

I am convinced that if the FA acted as arbitrarily again as they did in 1995, with a related or equally controversial matter that stung the youth leagues and clubs of England into a fury, then the NAYFL would be a ready and able vehicle to oppose and publicise objections to edicts detrimental to the youth game.

In those 5 years of its existence the NAYFL has seen the FA invest huge amounts of finance, expertise and effort into promoting 'Mini Soccer' which has become a way of life in the youth football world.

Following the 1995 demonstration and the birth of the NAYFL I was invited onto the FA 'Charter Standards' Sub Committee, which I remained on from 1997 until dissolution in 2003. Paul Tompkins, Sally Dolan, then of the Bexley Youth League, now the Selkent Youth League and myself were again invited to join an FA 'Working Party' to help set up the new FA level 1 Coaching Course that has been so successful across England 2001-2002. Again, solely due to our connection with the NAYFL were we invited to join this 'Working Party'.

Paul Tompkins had a Child Protection Policy in place when the FA launched their own policies and both he & I have been proactive in this field. Paul and I were again asked to join a 'Mini Soccer' Focus Group from 2002-2003, when the possibility (now reality of 9 v 9 was discussed). In 2003 I was also invited to join a FA 'Learning Marketing Course' Working Party.

As late as February 2005 Terry Williams, myself were invited to Walsall to meet Les Howie to discuss Child Protection issues, 9 x 9 and Charter Standard Leagues. This was followed by a trip to Villa Park to watch England v Holland! Les reiterated our point, that our own success as a forum for the countries youth leagues has probably caused apathetic membership interest whilst 'there is nothing to moan about'!

I always look back to the '95 demonstration as a pivotal moment in the future and development of our youth football in England on two counts.

Firstly, the FA, after years of indifference and neglect woke up and took notice of 'our' football and we've been on a roll ever since. Secondly, from that spring morning the idea of the National Association of Youth Football Leagues was conceived.

It would seem that in those 5 years youth football as we know it has moved on into areas and advances unbelievable in 1995. The NAYFL. cannot, by any standards, take all the credit from County Associations, especially those that have an active youth representation have played their part considerably.

The NAYFL, however, remains a strong and consistent part of the youth football scene in England and long may it survive and thrive.

Alan Clarke -

(President & Ex Chairman, National Association of Youth Football Leagues).