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Fixtures Q&A

Fixtures Q&A with Iain Blair

It is that time of year again. While we are all enjoying the World Cup action, we will have to put our vuvuzelas down for a moment and turn our attention back to domestic business – with the publication of the Clydesdale Bank Premier League fixtures for 2010/11 on Thursday morning at 9am.

scotprem.com spoke to Iain Blair, the SPL's Company Secretary, and as he explains, it is a crucial task for the SPL, but is one that is not without its challenges.

“Putting together the fixture list has always been a complicated process but in recent years we have tried to do more to explain how it all works. There are always going to be issues and conflicts – that is one promise I can make! But if people understand the process they will be more likely to accept the outcomes.”

What role do the clubs have in the process?

“We have a group of club representatives who sit on the Fixtures Working Group. Celtic, Hearts, Hibernian, Kilmarnock and Rangers are all involved in this. They provide the SPL Board with their recommendations on issues like the start date of the season, how many midweek cards are to be used and what our priorities should be.

“From there, the SPL Board will instruct Neil and me to prepare the detailed fixture list. So, while the clubs don't get the chance to review their individual games, they do set our objectives and let us know what the key things are we need to try and avoid.”

Is it true that a Canadian company are involved?

“Yes. Optimal Planning Solutions are specialists in this territory. Their software helps create the fixture list for leagues across North America, Europe and Australia and this is the third year we have worked with them.

“They have driven big improvements on how the fixtures are generated by allowing us to incorporate a range of different requests. They also programme in the level of priorities set by our clubs which the software takes into account when it creates the final fixture list. I am sure that the guys in Canada will also be looking forward to reading the latest conspiracy theories that will no doubt emerge about this year's fixtures!”

There was a lot of criticism about the post-split fixtures last year, has this been taken on board?

“The split system does throw up issues and imbalances. These happen when a club who finished in the top six one year, finishes in the bottom six the next year or vice versa. But if Celtic, Dundee United, Hearts, Hibernian, Motherwell and Rangers finish in the top six this season then all clubs will play 19 home games and 19 away games. Also, if this happens, clubs in each half of the split will play their opponents twice at home and twice away.

“Most of the games have also been reversed from last season. For example, the first Old Firm derby was at Ibrox last year, so this year it will be at Celtic Park.”

Some clubs felt last year that they had a particularly difficult start to the season. Have you tried to avoid that?

“We raised this one with the Fixtures Working Group and the Board. They were clear with their instruction to us that we should not be making value judgements on what we think is an easy game or what is a difficult one. That is not our job. So, no, we don’t build that into our system.”

Why can clubs not play at home one week and away the next through the whole season?

“Well for a start that isn’t mathematically possible. What is possible is that you can try ensure that it happens at certain points of the season, like over the first four games, or the final four games running up to the split.

“There are a few more instances though where clubs will face back to back away games this season. This is a result of us accommodating some of the other requests from the clubs. For example, the clubs wanted to ensure a home game on Boxing Day or at the New Year card so that no clubs are away for both fixtures. As there is a game in between, this means that clubs either face two home games in a row or two away games in a row over that period. But they will benefit from having one home game on either of the lucrative festive dates.

“We also have a number of requests from clubs or from the police about avoiding games at certain stadiums on specific dates. Rugby internationals at Murrayfield can clash with Hearts home games for example.

“Also, in terms of the operational side of things, we have to avoid games being played in the same locality in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee on the same day. Obviously as part of this we need to work with the SFL to co-ordinate things in Dundee.

“As soon as you factor all of these things in it can knock a club out of its home-away-home-away rhythm.

Will Craig Levein have any issues with the fixtures?

“That is a question for Craig but we do try and take the national side into account. A big issue in the past has been the scheduling of the Old Firm derbies. Hopefully the guys at the Scottish FA will appreciate that there won’t be an Old Firm derby either before or after any of the international dates next season.

“The Old Firm fans should look forward to another New Year derby though – we reintroduced them last year and this was popular. In fact all the local derbies will take place on the New Year card. This has the added benefit of minimising travel around this time of year.”

On the issue of travel, does having Inverness CT in the league throw up any issues?

“Well it is a fact that for most fans, Inverness is a bit further away than Falkirk. It’s an extra few hours up the A9 for the clubs in the central belt but we just have to deal with that. You need to put it in context though, down south you have Middlesbrough and Portsmouth in the same division for example.

“We look at which clubs have had long journeys on midweek nights or at Christmas in recent seasons and try to avoid repeating them. But we can’t have Inverness CT playing away on all those dates, that wouldn’t be fair either.

“We welcome Inverness CT back into the SPL and wish them, and all the rest of the clubs, the best of luck for next season.”