

Upset routine

LEYTON ORIENT

Football, particularly at the League One level, thrives on a predictable cadence: Saturday at 3pm, week in, week out. It's the metronome of a fan's week. But this season at Leyton Orient, that rhythm has been broken.

By the turn of the year, Orient will have only had three league games at Brisbane Road with Saturday 3pm kick-offs this season. Postponements due to international call-ups have seen three weekend home matches moved to midweek, while two other Saturday games have had their kick-off times moved for Sky Sports coverage – disrupting fans' routines, hitting attendance figures, and arguably contributing to the team's poor performances. Combined with rising ticket prices and a growing sense of disconnection between the club and its community, the season has become one of discontentment.

For Aynsley Taylor, editor of the fanzine *Leyton Orientear*, the disruptions have been profound. "Saturday 3pm is the epicentre of the working week. It gives a rhythm to the season," he explains. "Now it's all over the place – three matches in a week, two weeks off." Orient's struggles at Brisbane Road have been evident this season, failing to win any of their first five league games at home. A 3-0 win against Blackpool in mid-November, coinciding with a rare Saturday 3pm kick-off, offered hope, but Taylor sees the fixture chaos as a contributing factor to their poor form.

"You start building up decent form, and then you don't have another game for two weeks," he says. "Or, if you get a bad defeat, you want to put it right straight away – not wait two weeks."

Attendances have dropped from an average of 8,361 last season to just 7,285 for the first six home matches this year and midweek matches, despite official figures, have visibly emptier stands. "You can see it with your own eyes," Taylor says. "The club claims the numbers are OK, but they're clearly not."

Herman Wang, who blogs about the club as "Leyton Laureate", highlights the impact postponements have on families following the O's. "My boys have only been to two matches this season," he says. "The Tuesday games don't work – they've

Above Leyton Orient take on Blackpool in a rare 3pm kick-off; young fans make their way to Brisbane Road for a Saturday afternoon fixture

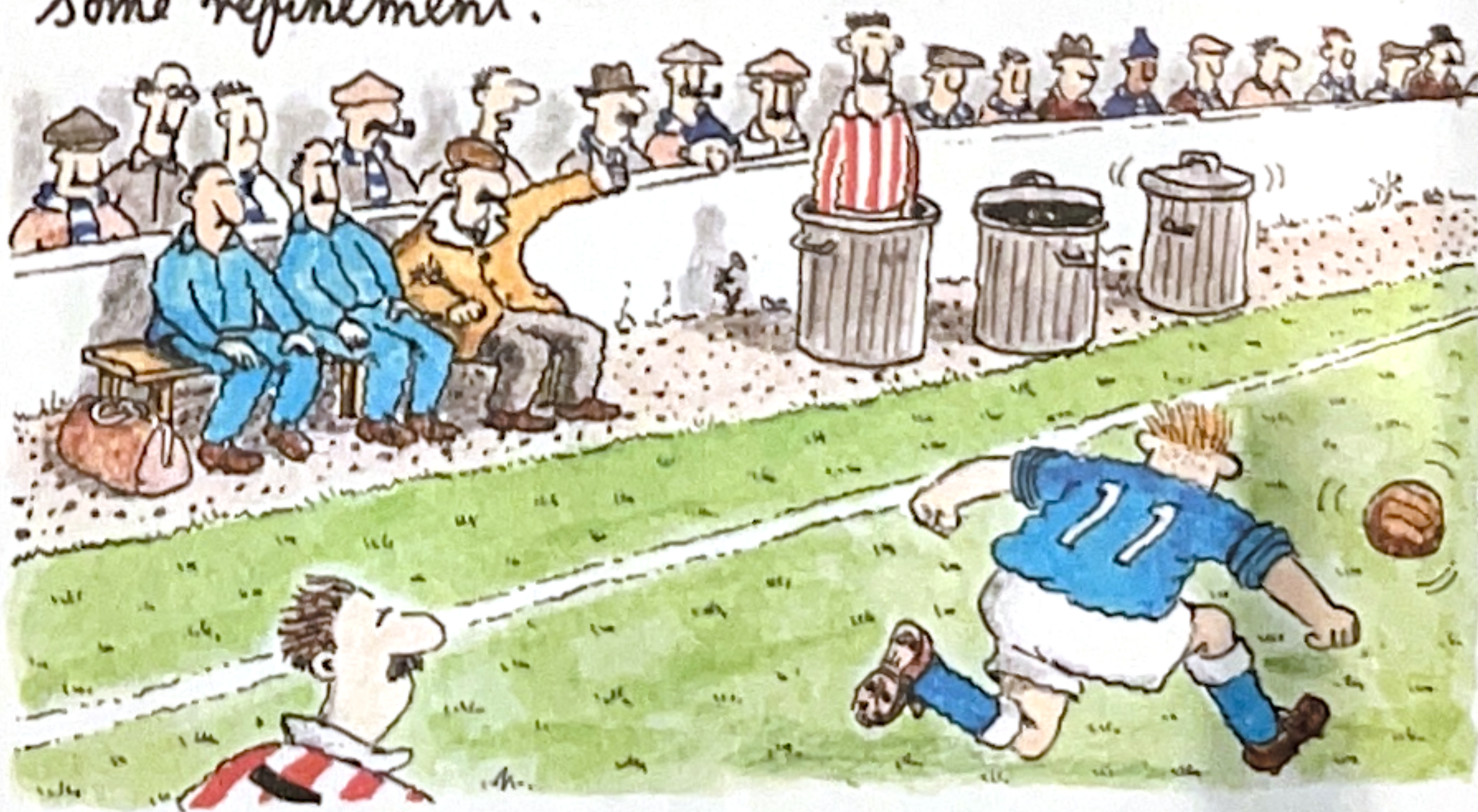
got school the next day. For them, it's like Orient are out of sight, out of mind." Wang laments how midweek games sap the joy out of the matchday experience. "It's dark and cold. People come straight from work, the stadium's half-empty. Saturday matches feel like a festival with your pre-match rituals, seeing family and friends. Tuesday nights don't compare."

Although beyond Orient's control, the postponements reflect a wider problem within football of an oversaturated calendar and the demands of international football now permeating into the lower divisions. "We follow League One football partly because you don't get

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kick-off times messed about by broadcasters or matches postponed for internationals," Taylor says. "It's three o'clock Saturday, you go to the match."

There is an element of misfortune with all three international breaks so far this season coinciding with home games, but both Taylor and Wang believe the club could have been more proactive in recognising the issue and implementing measures to support fans.

Financial realities in League One are shifting, with Wrexham and Birmingham City reshaping the league's economics. Wang points out that Orient officials estimate that each Saturday match moved to a Tuesday costs around £50,000 in lost revenue, and for a team already struggling with financial sustainability, the knock-on effects could be severe.

Orient have tried to soften the blow to fans, offering discounted tickets for the rearranged fixture against Huddersfield, but Taylor isn't convinced it's enough. "People are questioning whether they'll renew their season tickets next year. If we have another season like this, it's just not worth it."

For Wang, the season has been "a perfect storm", with ticket price hikes, fixture disruptions and poor results leave the club at somewhat of an inflection

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point: "When the team's not doing well and you're playing in front of half-empty stadiums, it's just not a good feeling." Taylor takes it a step further. "It's been miserable, to be honest. Hard to enjoy, hard to engage with." He believes there are serious consequences to alienating core supporters: "I think the club fundamentally misunderstands the value of our

offer. It has started to lose track of what the attraction, the appeal of Leyton Orient and League One football actually is."

Orient fans will at least be relieved that the second half of the season promises fewer midweek fixtures, giving them a chance to settle back into routine and hope for improvement.

Harry Crichton