

## 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

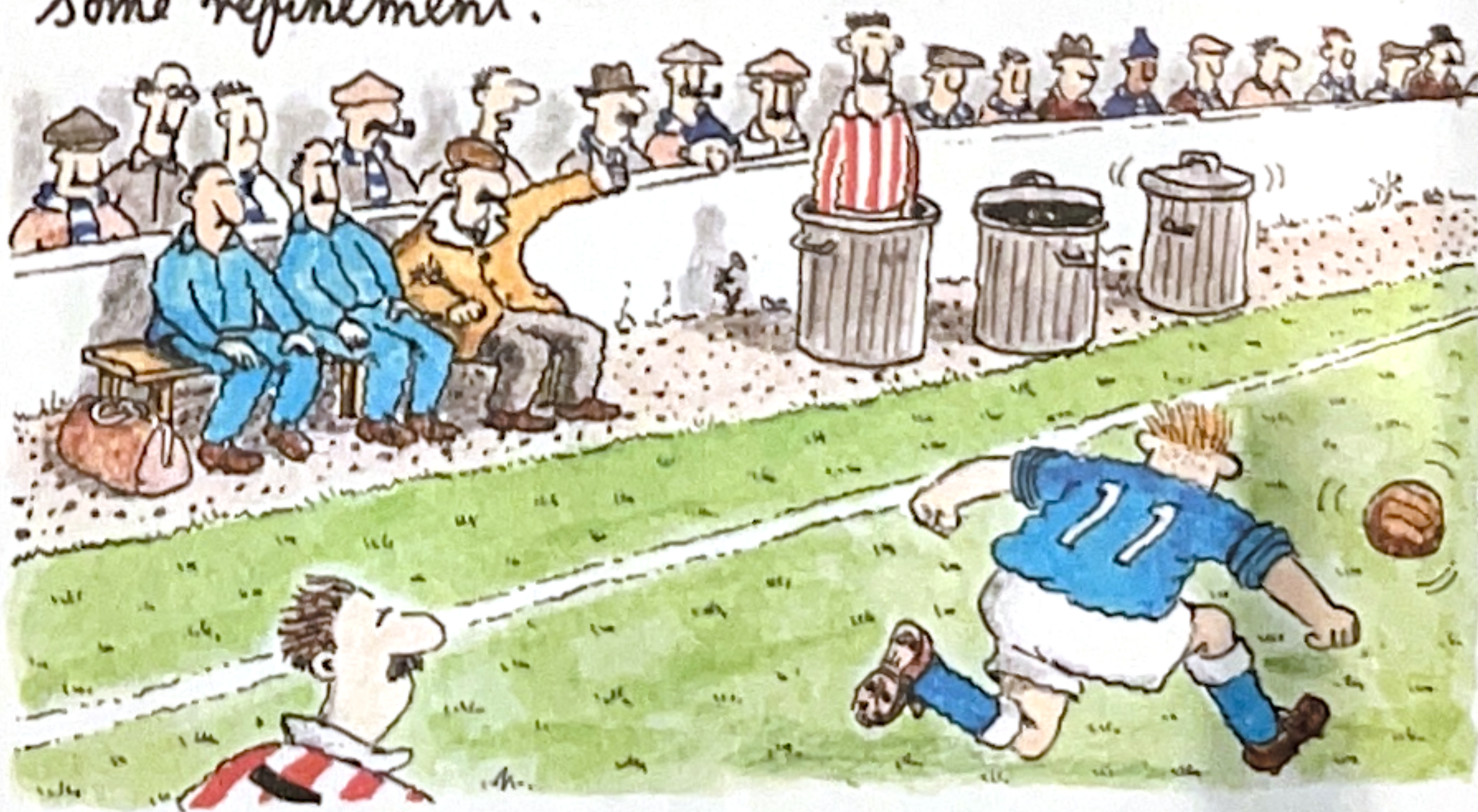
got school the next day. For them, it's like Orient are out of sight, out of mind." Wang laments how midweek games sap the joy out of the matchday experience. "It's dark and cold. People come straight from work, the stadium's half-empty. Saturday matches feel like a festival with your pre-match rituals, 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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*Initial attempts at football 'sin bins' needed some refinement.*





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



# Showing up

## 3PM BLACKOUT

The Saturday 3pm TV blackout keeps matchday traditions alive and the lower leagues afloat. But it is under threat – and the growing number of televised matches is making it look outdated. Next season, Premier League (PL) coverage will expand to 270 televised games from 200, alongside over 1,000 EFL matches under

Sky's deal. This expanded coverage underscores a shifting landscape, where only four PL matches are typically played on Saturday afternoons. UEFA's Article 48 – the rule enforcing the blackout – requires 50 per cent of matches to kick off at 3pm, a standard that is increasingly unfeasible.

Scrapping the blackout is less of a bold revolution and more of a slow,

**Below** A big crowd watch Dulwich Hamlet at Champion Hill; the main stand takes shape at Cray Wanderers' new Flamingo Park home  
**Right** TalkSport presenter Jeff Stelling

grinding inevitability, prompting a strong reaction from TalkSport's Jeff Stelling to media reports in early December that the change could come in once the Premier League's current broadcasting deal expires in 2029. "The headline should read: 'Greedy Premier League – it's all about us – you lot can go and do one.' If Grimsby play Morecambe on a cold, wet, miserable Saturday afternoon and Manchester City against Manchester United is being shown live at three o'clock on TV, how many people are going to go to Grimsby against Morecambe? I can tell you how many: a big fat zero. And that will be the end of clubs at a lower level."

Deloitte reports that matchday revenues make up just 14 per cent of Premier League clubs' income – it's the garnish on their banquet. For lower league clubs, though, it's what keeps the lights on. The EFL's commitment to the Sky deal



GETTY IMAGES (2), GARY HILLMAN, CRAY WANDERERS



underlines its focus on securing lucrative broadcast revenues, a financial lifeline for many clubs.

Yet, this pursuit may come at a cost: research suggests that it could strip EFL clubs of a combined £37 million in matchday revenues – there are often noticeable drops in attendance for EFL clubs at midweek games broadcast on TV. But what about the rest of the footballing ecosystem? In England, football thrives at every level and while the top tiers chase broadcast revenues, non-League clubs rely on loyal fans and matchday income to survive.

South London-based Dulwich Hamlet, of the seventh-tier Isthmian League Premier Division, draw significant home crowds and CEO Ben Clasper is unequivocal: “We have no voice. They talk about giving smaller clubs a voice, they never listen to it. They’re going to do what they want to do.” Clasper highlights the blackout’s irrelevance to Premier League clubs in comparison to those at Hamlet’s level. “One hundred per cent of our income is matchday. Even indirect revenues like our sponsorship deals are only there because there are 3,000 people in the ground. If it doesn’t come through the door, it doesn’t feature on our budget.”

Cray Wanderers, another club in the Isthmian Premier, recently relocated and took ownership of their new home, Flamingo Park. This gives them a platform for a more sustainable future. CEO Sam Wright echoes a similar sentiment: “Those at the top are not interested in us. We are very embryonic, trying to get fans in with free season tickets and community engagement. Now we own the ground, we really want to take advantage of secondary spend, but this would make it much harder for us to survive.”

Wright, who sits on the Isthmian League’s board, points out the lack of engagement from decision-makers and Clasper agrees, arguing this reflects a broader need for reform. “They can talk about trickle-down economics all they want – it’s just grotty,” he says. “If Sky goes, or a Middle Eastern state pumps La Liga full of money and all the talent in this country disappears overnight, what’s left? The clubs in the Football League that have done nothing to become sustainable will disappear. If we’re going to rip this up, then they should be ripping the whole thing up. We’re the highest level football that doesn’t get central funding. So nothing from the TV deals makes its

way down to Dulwich Hamlet – we get none of the benefit, but all of the fallout.”

The impact of abolishing the 3pm blackout is clear and cuts deep. If the incoming independent regulator aims

to ensure a sustainable network and pyramid of clubs throughout the English game, it will require a more bottom-up approach to decision-making.

Harry Crichton



VALENTIN LACIAR (2)

## Life giving

### ARGENTINA FILM

An on-the-ground World Cup documentary that doesn’t set foot in the host country: released on Copa90’s YouTube channel on December 18, two years to the day since the final of the 2022 World Cup in Doha, the concept that eventually became *Once in a Lifetime: Argentina* had long been rattling around in the head of its director and producer Eli Mengem.

“From the moment Russia 2018 ended and with no interest in heading to Qatar, I had said that I wanted to spend the next World Cup in the southern hemisphere,” he says. “Having grown up in Australia amongst winter World Cups and having then spent the last ten years living in Europe amongst summer World Cups I knew how much of a difference it made and how special it would be.”

The death of Diego Maradona in November 2020 and Lionel Messi’s insistence that this would be his last World Cup focused Mengem’s mind on Argentina being the story that, as he states in the film’s introduction, he

“had to tell”, with his previous work in Copa90’s *Once in a Lifetime* series – on Real Betis, Trabzonspor, Freiburg and Osasuna – seeing him go in storytelling pursuit of teams and fans on the verge of achievements not experienced for generations.

A four-part film totalling over two and a half hours, the cults of Maradona and Messi are two of the many strands introduced in the first two episodes, which with the help of a well-chosen range of interviewees deftly but comprehensively

outline the chemistry of Argentina’s national psyche (steak, tango, gauchos, the agro-export model of the late 19th century) before applying this anthropological understanding to the country’s all-encompassing, all-or-nothing approach to football and bringing the viewer up to speed on its chequered recent tournament history.

Episodes three and four see Mengem and his team land in Buenos Aires to docu-



“City need a high profile scapegoat for this mess – I nominate Noel Gallagher”

DAVE ROBINSON

ment the ten days of national obsession bordering on “religious fervour” that include the dramatic quarter-final win on penalties against the Netherlands, watched in the capital’s sweltering and frenetic fanzone; the 3-0 semi-final victory over Croatia, for which Mengem heads to Messi’s home city of Rosario; and the long build-up to the final against France. On the news, stories of shared jubilation and spontaneous generosity have temporarily transformed the

**Above** Director Eli Mengem on location in Buenos Aires; supporters pack the city’s Plaza de la República for the team’s homecoming and victory parade