

Football

Mike Bracken looks for the wood behind the trees of Notts Forest.

Nottingham Forest are currently third in the Premier League, with a lucrative place in next seasons European competitions virtually secured and two new stands recently completed. They have players of world class pedigree in Dutchman Bryan Roy, and one of Englands finest in Stan Collymore. Crowds are soaring, and their sponsors have just announced a two year extension to their contract.

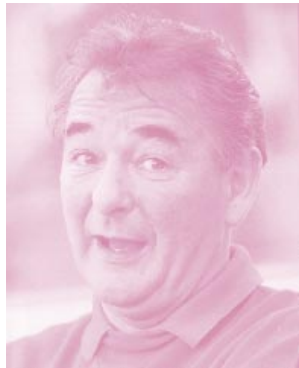
Yet last week, Forest's affable boss Frank Clark announced that they do not have £15,000 for a new player. Nottingham Forest are skirt.

So where has all the money gone? A quick look at the cast of characters associated with the club in the last few years reads like rogues gallery.

Brian Clough: talismanic manager turned alcoholic, Clough led the club through 15 years

of success, but his idiosyncratic style could not hide his drinking problems and when the club was relegated, his resignation was followed by rumours of financial misdemeanours concerning players transfers. Maurice Roworth: chairman through Cloughs era, but his illegal money laundering landed the stockbroker with a 2 year prison sentence. Fred Reacher: the present chairman, the ex-police-man turned publican refused tell the board the source of his own finances, and when World in Action suggested that he had overseen financial irregularities, Reacher laughed and replied prove it .

Andrew Plumb: the Forest ticket officer who admitted altering ticket allocations and is awaiting conviction, Plumb alleges that he was acting for various members of the club management and is being made into a scapegoat. Irving Korn: bankrupt twice and reduced to selling socks on Nottingham market, Korn is now an integral part of the Forest board. George Waterhouse: the director who refused to sign the clubs accounts and was ousted to make way for



Keith Gibson, who duly signed. Teddy Sheringham: his transfer to Spurs raised eyebrows at the time, and when rumours that a Forest official was paid 50,000 in cash at a motorway service station for his part in the deal, the FA launched an inquiry. Ronnie Fenton: Clough's assistant, Fenton faces allegations of ticket fraud and was turned down for several jobs until Terry Venables, now England coach but Spurs manager at the time of the Sheringham deal, offered him an unofficial scouting job for the FA.



Confused? You will be. In the very near future, Maurice Roworth is coming out of jail - and he is very happy. So unhappy, in fact, that he has decided to serialise his version of events at Forest in The Sunday Express. And for a lot of people with an awful lot to lose, Roworths ramblings are bad news.

For, if you have a Sky dish, Premier League football is a whole new ball game. Murdochs money has empowered the elite, and the movers and shakers of the new football world want no talk of missing millions to blight their squeaky clean image. Already this year, Mersons habits (societys problem), Wise s assault on a cabbie (totally out of character) and Cantona s kick (he was provoked) have tarnished the Premier League s image.

But the Premier politicians have always had the safety that events before their inception could not be pinned on them, part of the reason why the FA finds itself stumbling from one crisis to another. And now, all of a sudden, a talkative stool pigeon threatens to outline how the current board of one of the Premier ships finest have illegally squandered the clubs riches, how the much feted manager organised his many transfer



dealings, and how one of those transfers involved the current England boss, who now has the authority to postpone Premier ship fixtures so his players can have a training session. And you thought this would be a quiet summer as far as football goes!

That Nottingham Forest Football Club are incompetently led is hardly news to many Forest fans. To give one of many examples, chairman Reacher announced grandiloquently that club sponsor Labatts would donate £1.5m towards the redevelopment of the Trent End stand. It soon emerged that this followed only initial discussions with the firm, who immediately denied the story, leaving the club to foot the bill, and the chairman with his foot firmly in his mouth. Although an absence of any diplomatic skill should not rule anyone out of becoming a club chairman, the continued reports of misplaced

funds should really make people ask questions.

Although Brian Clough s management career was incredibly successful, throughout the 1980 s his erratic behaviour spilled away from football and into finance. Always keen to manipulate the press, he encouraged players to sell splash-es to the tabloids along the My time with Cloughie line. Indeed, his repeated tabloid spreads netted him upwards of 10,000 time, and when added to his pr interests and TV commercials, Cloughs finances appeared assured. Just in case, there was always the string of newagents to fall back on, and even a autobiography ghost written by Sun hack and close friend John Sadler. Despite this, both the FA and the internal revenue are examining claims that Clough took percentages of players transfer deals in return for arranging their sale. Curiously, Clough has recent-



ly asked for and received a testimonial match for his benefit. It would appear that Brian Clough needs the money, and since not even George Best and Oliver Reed could drink their way through the money that Old Big Ed has stacked up over the years, the question must be asked: Where has all the money gone?

Not, it would seem, to Nottingham Forest. £164,000 is currently unaccounted for in the clubs finances. But details of where money has been going are fast emerging. Fenton, Clough's old assistant, has admitted accepting £45,000 from players agents in lieu of services rendered (ie, fixing lucrative transfers). The £50,000 bung mentioned in connection with the Sheringham transfer remains unaccounted for. Clough has threatened to sue if accused of taking the cash, but Fenton has remained tight lipped. At the time of the deal, Fenton was unhappy with Clough, who only returned from Mallorca days before the start of the new season. The deal had already been vetoed once by the board as it could deter season ticket buyers, but someone pushed it through, and in the summer Fenton spent a great amount of time arranging the terms of the transfer.

In all likelihood, the amnesty

granted to other premierships clubs by the inland revenue in return for their co-operation and repayment of debts will be stretched to cover Nottingham Forest. Arsenal, Liverpool and Rangers are amongst some of the bigger clubs to have helped the authorities in this manner. With Collymore



almost certain to be sold for over \$5million, the hole in the clubs finances could be neatly filled, especially because season ticket prices have risen hugely, and money for next season could be safely banked before the silverware is sold in the shape of Collymore and Stone.

Forest, though, are a peculiar case. They have little clout in FA

circles, especially as their motor-mouth ex-manager delighted in taunting the authorities for years, and with boardroom dissent rife added to the current managers refusal to have anything to do with the previous administration, it could well be that Forest become the whipping boys for footballs failure to clean up its arcane system of financing and accounting that the Premiership has brought to light. Football is particularly fickle when it comes to self policing, and bigger names than

Forest have taken the rap before now: Tony Kay, Bernard Tapie, Silvio Berlusconi, Swindon Town, Alan Sugar all set a precedent, and it was this: whenever the game is in trouble, football authorities reserve the right to set a precedent and choose the most convenient whipping boy.

Enter, stage left, Maurice Rowath.....



Hot Gossip

If you think this is a tribute to Kenny Everett then think again. Mike Bracken delves in to the sleazy underbelly of sport and rakes up some facts. As well as Paul Merson, two prominent London footballers, - one an established international, - are well known for their cocaine use. An ex-international, now a well respected TV pundit, was forced to change clubs following an involvement with a 15 year old girl. The court sentence hanging over a youth team player in one of London's premier teams was effectively removed following a pay off from the club.

The above stories, and many others, are widely known but remain unreported. Although the archaic libel laws account for some of this media reticence, the degree to which football and the media, particularly newspapers, contrive to determine what stories appear is becoming increasingly apparent. This cosy relationship, unchallenged for years, is in danger of being blown apart, and this could largely be due to fans taking up the issues through

the internet.

Rising ticket prices, television agreements necessitating inconvenient kick off times and the perennial fear of football violence have begun to erode the base of traditional football fans. The commercial might of the new Premier league added to the inability of the F.A. to enforce its own disciplinary decisions have led to a media circus, where the antics of Spurs, Cantona, Merson et al are far more likely to be resolved on the back pages or in court than in front of the F.A. This degree of lawlessness and media driven resolutions to the games problems has further alienated the fans.

In some ways, this is nothing new. In the mid 1980s, following English clubs expulsion from European competition, ITV and the BBC hugely inflated the financial worth of the domestic game. The influx of money led to increased ticket prices and spiralling transfer fees. As official supporters clubs were disbanded (Liverpool) and commercial interests removed any grassroots involvement by fans on the board (Spurs), a new wave of

fanzines was born.

Ranging from the idolatrous (The Gooner at Arsenal), to the virtuous (When Skies are Grey - Everton), many fanzines became an outlet for the vitriol of disaffected long time supporters. Spawning a new phase in football as fashion, the fanzines soon became embroiled in legal issues connected to the club, and many have been seized, banned or sued for often printing the truth. Apart from a few notable exceptions, libel laws and the commercial might of the clubs led to many fanzines becoming as insipid and bland as official club programmes (Newcastle and Manchester United).

Fanzines now are often little more than tongue in cheek idolatry with witty names. The real dirt is often to be found in fanzines dedicated to smaller clubs, where the supporters often have easier access to both club and players. Brentford's Beesotted provides a good example of this.

But if Murdoch's Sky TV money has changed the structure of the game, it has also increased the frustration of the long time supporter, one who is increasingly priced out of the market. And this time, the refuge of the supporter could well be the Internet.



With Internet access rates increasing exponentially, football related pages are being swamped by new users. The Sportstats football page, a text based statistical run-down of the season so far, has been accessed by over 13,000 different users since February this year. Considering that this is one of the most basic sites, it gives some idea of the promise that football on the Internet holds.

Although most club pages are currently hagiographical and embarrassingly naive, the voice of the alienated supporter is increasingly making itself heard - and it is very loud and very, very angry. Robert Chase is a cunt is not the most elegant language, but for a long-time Norwich fan who has seen this chairman sell the clubs best players until relegation overtook the club, Norwich home pages and newsgroups are a welcome place to unload some pent-up anger.

The majority of football sites are run by serious supporters, often in awe of the particular club they follow, or so it would seem. The Everton site is typical. With extensive images of players, club officials and even the stands and ground, the text is limited to club histories and details of past successes. Even the match-reports are biased, and the only

serious comment concerns the merits of individual players. Although a description of Paul Rideout as tall and crap may raise a giggle, it is no substitute for real debate.

As well as the obvious commercial possibilities, the gentlemen agreement between football clubs and the established press would be destroyed. There would be little that clubs could do to conceal news that, when it rarely makes it into the papers, is usually referred to as a nightclub incident. All this is likely to spell bad news for sports hacks with their own niche interest, but for the fan, their whole relationship with the club of their choice will be altered.

Not only do the various news-groups provide a platform for debate that not even the old terraces could match, but the commercial aspect of the team sites will leave the clubs with little choice to get involved. Many clubs, such as Manchester United and Newcastle, already have their range of replica kits and other souvenirs displayed by fans unconnected with the club. Norwich, going a step further, combine video images with adverts for the clubs of ficial video range, and Reading will soon have an internet site for their top striker Jimmy Quinn.

With the rising costs of Premiership survival forcing clubs to exploit every commercial possibility, it seems unfeasible that the clubs will allow the sites to grow without some say in their development. And this is where the problem lies. How can the clubs invest in a media that has the capacity to be openly scathing of the club. As previously happened with the rash of fanzines, clubs may consider wresting control of team sites from the fans.

With libel laws still unclear regarding the Internet, and many clubs suspicious of a technology they know little about, the clubs have a long way to go before they dominate the net. There is also the possibility that existing TV and newspapers could enter the equation, but what is certain is this: there will be very little opportunity for clubs and papers to suppress information, as any person with access to that information could distribute it on a scale and at a speed that dwarfs current reports.

Will footballs flirtation with the Internet be led by the media, the clubs or the fans? The only answer that I can offer is that old cliché:

WATCH THIS SPACE!!

