

Noticed the difference at Highbury?

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Story by Ben

What a season we've had! It's never been anything but an electric, emotional roller coaster following The Arsenal! We're improving both on and off the pitch too – all the time.

The vision of Messrs Wenger, Hill-Wood, Edelman et al is to strive for the best in all we do and who says we won't get there? In three years' time, we may well have the best football ground, training facilities and team in England so it's an oft argued point among Gooner circles that the one thing that seems to have had the opposite trend is our home support.

We've all put in our opinion as to why it's happened, when it changed, how different was it before really and whether or not it makes a difference to the players. One thing we can all agree on, though, is the demographic at Highbury has changed! There's absolutely no disputing that! We get 'em all! All classes and colours from every part of England and, occasionally, the world. We've got standers, singers, nutters, moaners and those who just want to watch the game in peace. It's not an Arsenal thing – it's a top-flight English football thing and every team in the Premiership has this variety of football fan among its faithful. It's something we may never see change in our lifetime, such is the popularity and commercial appeal of footy so....what to do?

Something that comes hand in hand with these changes in the game is the alienation of the fans by the club. A very serious issue that, before this season, had become evident in this beloved club of ours. What happened to the focus groups? The club claim the much-castigated new crest was put before a focus group as was the introduction of a blue kit in the mid '90s. Purists have argued against both with good reason and it seemed the relationship between the fans and the board was deteriorating in spite of the glorious football Arsene Wenger has bought us. So what's changed in this year? Well, in addition to the Fans' Forum, we now have an Atmosphere Forum which was formed when Keith Edelman and David Dein decided a group of fans had to be formed who could not only come up with suggestions themselves on improvements but could also network with other Arsenal fans and listen to their opinions. A group of Gooners who were determined to make Highbury noisy and, dare we say, intimidating again and the first year of the new forum has been a fruitful one!

A few fans had been identified as being quite pro-active and singled out to establish a forum along with representatives from AISA, AFSC, Fans' Forum and The Gooner fanzine. We knew that, in spite of the club coming to us, we had to be tentative in our approach and not too aggressive otherwise we'd be told to get lost! Our aims were simple and ideas were taken from fellow fans and suggestions within the group. Working in conjunction with Sue Campbell and Keith Edelman at the club, the first initiative, Fans' Day, was one the club devised and saw through which we ended up hi-jacking with some Gooner input. This would be a series of small events at Highbury to add a change to the usual format of matchdays. Ideas included a songsheet (about which there's been lengthy discussion), a "Karaoke" in the North Bank before kick-off, Arsenal fan and tenor Tony Henry doing a half-time rendition of songs and a beer promotion encouraging people to get to the ground earlier. As you can imagine, with the bureaucracy of the club and how far out of touch they are with us lot, there was a lot of.....let's say.....difference of opinion! What we wanted and what the club were willing to do were polar opposites! There was a lot of compromise on our part and the end results of our first initiative – Fans' Day – were not ideal and a world away from what we initially drew out.

Firstly, the beer promotion in the North Bank wasn't nearly as revolutionary as we'd first hoped. We are blessed with some of the best pubs in Highbury and we felt if an element of that vibe you get in Twelve Pins/Arsenal Tavern/The Gunners could be brought early to the North Bank, it could get our atmosphere going earlier and avoid more people strolling in during kick-off. This required a lure for the drinking Gooner in the form of a beer promotion. We were hoping for £1.50 a pint or maybe a two-for-one deal but we learned that the lager franchise at the stadium is held exclusively by Carling and is very restrictive! The best we got out of them was one-and-a-half pints for the (already extortionate) price of one. We lost out there due to what seemed to be an unavoidable bit of red tape.

Next up was the songsheet! There's few more cynical than a Highbury regular and anything looking like it's come from the club is sneered at straight away! Our idea was to have some new songs submitted by Arsenal fans on a black and white sheet just for a bit of inspiration. The idea came from fans at Liverpool and Man United where it had worked well so you have a look at the sheet and either you like it or wipe your Arsenal with it! The songs that were submitted were the kind you hear sung by Gooners at away pubs before kick-off and we stuck them down having given them a try and given the final ones the nod. Nothing too inflammatory e.g. no anti-Semitism or swearing! The club had a look at our draft, gave a few "hmmmm"s and "aaaah"s and then tore the whole thing apart! We were on tentative ground and were careful how we handled the whole thing but the club got their way and the songsheet was two-sided, multi-coloured and featured brand spanking new songs such as 'Vieira' (to 'Volare') and 'Ooh Ah! Ray Parlour!'. Revolutionary, I'm sure you'll agree. We tried to explain that any Arsenal fan who doesn't know the words to "We Got Dennis Bergkamp" should be dragged out of the East Stand and beaten with a very large stick but they felt that the songsheet should feature old songs on one side and new ones on the other. As for the new ones, we had some diamonds on there, we really did! They were removed and our second string of new songs were put on instead as the first few, containing some harmless banter aimed at Mancs and Spurs, were felt to be too insulting. This just punctuated to us how far out of touch the board were and, in turn, how important our focus group would turn out to be! We bit our tongue and took the brunt of the criticism from various circles of Arsenal fans! We knew one day it would be worth eating humble pie in front of embarrassed fans and pander to a disillusioned board if we were to become influential and taken seriously.

The Karaoke (which has now been re-branded as the "North Bank Knees-Up") was a roaring success! A simple but effective idea. We were to take over the North Bank stage (usually occupied by various bands) an hour before kick-off and compere a variety of old and new songs before our game with Man City. We introduced ourselves as Ben, Paul and Des and explained it was a free-for-all. If you want to come on the stage and sing something old or new, just come up! The crowd of several hundred North Bank regulars were unsure at first but warmed to the idea and within minutes we had the place rocking! We pushed the tolerance of stewards and staff to the hilt but never overstepped the mark by making sure those who came up censored themselves. I still grin thinking about how we handled "The Wanky Tottenham Hotspur"! A successful event followed up four weeks' later for the Charlton game.

Tony Henry's a top bloke and, despite being berated by the Clockers at half time, turned them and the whole Highbury crowd to his way of thinking with renditions of 'Volare' and 'Delilah' in the middle of the pouring rain! Well done that man!

The next question we asked ourselves a few weeks on was "Why can't we have flags and banners like they do in Serie A?". Flag Day was something we asked about the practicalities of and the club came back with various answers ranging from Islington Council not allowing it for Health & Safety reasons to the stadium manager not agreeing to it. We needed clarification so we went to Islington council ourselves who, to our shock, gave the idea the nod! It seemed to be a goer and we asked the club to publicise it in the program along with posters in the stands but, to our dismay, only received a small section in the Southampton (h) program. In spite of this, several dozen fans brought flags and made an event of it. The idea of flags has grown on hundreds more home and away Gooners since! This fanzine even knocked up a huge 15ft by 12ft red and white flag with "We Are The Arsenal" adorned loud and proud, which has appeared at Liverpool (in the Clock End), Newcastle away, Leeds (North Bank) and Spurs so.....we're getting there!

"How about a few banners then?" one of us mentioned! We ran the idea past the lovely Sue who was as supportive and influential as ever and managed to get two banners on the North Bank overhang for the Liverpool game which the club kindly paid for. One had "WHL '71" and the other had "Anfield '89" and, even if I do say so myself, look fucking fantastic! The comments we've heard and feedback from fans has been tremendous! Our Liverpool home game was shown live on the French channel Canal+ and the pundits and commentators spent around 20 minutes before and during the match talking about the banners and the culture behind it! The whole piss-taking meaning behind them and how reflective those statements are to our club's illustrious history.

Things are looking up for us! We've really made headway with every level of the club and every type of fan. The future holds unbounded possibilities for us and we're looking at adding several other things including

another couple of North Bank Knees-Ups, a few more of the popular banners including, of course, “Old Trafford ‘02” and “WLH ‘04” (which have since been debuted at the Birmingham game) and possibly a Rocastle one. There’s also ‘Fancy Fulham’ where hundreds of away Gooners will be in fancy dress for a good old piss-up and a touch of eccentricity (which, at the time of writing, was being organised), a proper promotion of a ‘Flag Day’ for which information on knocking up your own flag will be given beforehand and (the big one) a possible singing section at Highbury so that the moaners/singers/standers/quiet types can all get their way and enjoy their matchday experience without kicking lumps out of each other.

We’d like to mention how grateful we are for the support of fellow Gooners with their suggestions and also Sue Campbell and Jill Smith at the club who have been our allies through it all! The Atmosphere Forum is your voice – the fans’ chance to influence what happens on matchdays. Any suggestions you have for us can be made to goonersongs@yahoo.co.uk and we’ll take on board everything said by everyone out there as we have been doing this season so far! We’ll continue to work in the best interests of the Arsenal supporters and battle through the red tape that the club have thrown at us. We know how you feel about the club as we feel the same way. We cheer and cry together and we need your support on future ideas.

End point? How fucking good is it being a Gooner under the Wenger era? Enjoy every moment of it and get behind your team!