

TALES OF MYSTERY AND IMAGINATION (or a night of plain speaking with an [almost] football director!)

[this article was written before Phil Wallace pulled out]

Last night I went down to the supporters club for the meeting with Phil Wallace, the latest business tycoon to blow into Leyton Stadium. Usually these people arrive at football clubs with a fanfare of declarations, objectives, promises and hollow commitments. Not this bloke. In fact Phil Wallace isn't even sure if he'll take over the club or not.



I strolled into the clubhouse hoping to find out why the club was in such a state - Mr Wallace couldn't tell us because 'such matters are confidential'. How close the club is to folding completely - very close according to Mr Wallace, and what can be done about it - Mr Wallace wasn't sure whether he will be staying at Orient or not.

Mr Wallace started out by saying that he would give straight answers to straight questions, but by the end of it I didn't really feel that I'd learnt anything very much. Sure a few rumours were quashed and others given greater credence, but the evening ended with much uncertainty in the air.

I got the feeling that the evening was just part of Mr Wallace's game plan. He said that when he first came into the O's (in December) he felt fifty-

about taking the club over. As the month has worn on he is feeling more negative than that. However, if he pulls out, there will be nothing left. He told us that he has already spoken to the board of directors to tell them to make contingency plans for another buyer. So, publicly, he was painting a very bleak picture. However, he also told us that he has three or four friends who will come in with him should he decide to stay at Leyton Stadium and the current board would obviously be displaced.

When he said that I began to think, "Hold on - this man is building up for a coup". It seemed to me that he was preparing to give the board an ultimatum, which would basically be that they all clear out to give him and his partners absolute free reign, or he pulls out, leaving the club to sink into oblivion with Weinrabe and co. frantically trying to salvage something.

Wallace doesn't seem too keen on the current board and it was noticeable that John Goldsmith was present, busily taking copious notes. Perhaps the board are thinking of bringing out a fanzine. At one point John told us that he had been asked not to say anything tonight. By whom? As usual, we never found out. In fact the whole evening was an exercise in how to spend two hours talking, but not saying much. Honestly, it was like listening to Tony Blair or John Major.

He told us that there had been other approaches, but they were all non-starters. He'd spoken to Dave Baker (middle name - The?) who said he represented Phil Rowe, an ex - QPR director. Dave Baker is a PR man who worked for QPR and Sky (boo!). He had no money and was basically looking for a job (according to Wallace) and Phil Rowe was unhappy that he had gone on clubcall and made such public approaches using his name. No deal!

One of our supporters, at one point, got up and declared that he was acting for someone interested in taking over the club, but he soon caught the "director's gag" disease and refused to reveal the identity of that person. What is it about football that makes those involved so

secretive? Even those who just want to be in charge behave like freemasons. God, it's a football club. We're not talking secret nuclear silos or industrial espionage, we're talking about a football club. We know it's broke - it has been for years, but those who know how this crisis has come about won't be drawn and the fans, as usual, are left with a series of half-truths, rumours and conspiracy theories, rather than openly stated facts. It can only make you believe that there has been, at best, mis-management of the club - the old chestnut of wages costing more than our gates bring in i.e. living beyond our means, or, at worst, money coming into the club hasn't been properly accounted for and something crooked has been going on. We will never be told, because these businessmen who like to involve themselves in football cover for each other and act like an elite club within football.

Some of the stuff that goes on sounds almost criminal. Money not being paid for transfers - Southend, allegedly, not honouring the agreement regarding Otto's sell on to Brum and giving O's just £50,000 in a "take it or leave it" fashion. Mr Wallace wouldn't comment on such stories, but an absolute denial was noticeably absent. He talked about the nine players on the transfer list. He needs to reduce the wage bill and try to get some money coming in. But there has only been one offer, and Chris Turner and John Sitton convinced him that the player in question should stay. He made it abundantly clear that the O's cannot sign any players at present on transfers or on loan because they are still needing PFA support to meet the wage bill.

So, there you go, the club is on the brink of an abyss called extinction and is teetering like a coach on a cliff edge. Will it plunge in or will help arrive in time to pull it away? We don't yet know and, Mr Wallace wasn't telling us. But, despite that, he still gave some opinions as to how he could see things in the future.

First, the commercial operation would change, and he believes another £100,000 a year is achievable. He's given Frank Woolf a commercial brief to get on with.

Second, the ground development should continue. It's the vision for the future. But the club has to be saved first and the ground scheme is not fully funded yet, so it has to go on the back burner for the minute. He felt that there's no

sense in having a grand stadium if there's no club to play in it. He doesn't believe that Leyton Orient will ever grace the Premier League so the future lies in having a youth policy that feeds players to richer clubs.

As for relegation, well Mr Wallace thinks it may be better to be top of the third than bottom of the second, but he is certainly not in favour of the club tumbling out of the league. Keeping professional football at Leyton Stadium is the bottom line as far as he is concerned and he would be happy to pass the club over to anyone who could demonstrably guarantee that they could meet all the debts and manage the losses to maintain Orient as a football league club.



Overall, I found the meeting quite sad, because the club's future is so dependent on whether or not a rich guy wants to have it as his plaything or not. I know that's the way it is with football at the moment, but I would really like to see some alternatives being developed, because we will one day run out of rich blokes who are interested. It's also irritating that a rich bloke can just breeze in and take over the club without any reference to the fans who have supported the club through thick and thin.

Still, as all O's supporters know, there is no such thing as fair play, sporting conduct, or justice when it comes to the crunch. All that counts is money - and bundles of it. There seems very little your average fan can do, except to sit and watch the rich cats play out our future.

God, supporting Orient is depressing at the minute, isn't it?