



Armchair managers: Simon Burrage, Simon Flower and Ian Blacklidge check their teams' performances

Fans enjoy ultimate football fantasy

SOCCER boss Alan Walles invested wisely during the close season. Mindful of his £20 million spending limit, he bought in some top talent, including England internationals Lee Dixon, Paul Parker, and Chris Waddle, plus Blackburn keeper Tim Flowers and Aston Villa hard man Paul McGrath.

The name of the team? Just the Pie. They play in the biggest football league in this country, which at the last count had 8,000 teams in it. Others include Nellie's Elephants, Outer Milan, Fulchester United and (a personal favourite) Nasty with a Hint of Silk.

Welcome to the world of fantasy football. By day, Alan Walles is a pensions adviser from Abbotts Place, Chesham. But in his spare time, he and his pals from The Nash Arms, Chesham, indulge in a little wish-fulfilment, holding sway over the fortunes of the nation's top football stars.

The Nash Arms Jolly Boys League also boasts teams called the Skinny Chickens and, last year's champions, Moss Bross Spartak.

High Wycombe has also spawned some fantasy teams. The Chairboys Super Premier League Conference, run by a group of Wycombe Wanderers fans, features clubs rejoicing in names such as Borussia Munchen-kebab and Surrey, Surrey, Rah, Rah, Rah (the manager of the latter is also a cricket fan).

If you have managed to avoid fantasy football so far, you won't for much longer. BBC Radio 5 has run a fantasy league for some time now, The Daily Telegraph is launching its own league this month, and on Friday the phenomenon comes to TV with Fantasy Football League at 11.15pm on BBC2.

DREAM TEAMS By ANDREW CHATFIELD

Fantasy footy is a sort of dungeons and dragons for the soccer obsessed. But whereas war gamers might re-live The Battle of Waterloo or the Siege of Stalingrad, fantasy footballers live through the real-life exploits of players in the present Premiership.

Participants have the chance to pick and manage a totally notional team of Premiership players.

In the official Fantasy League, you bid against mates in your own local league to capture the hottest talent in a tense pre-season auction.

The only cash which actually changes hands is the £20 it costs to sign up to the whole scheme. But each boss has a notional £20 million budget, which can soon get eaten up if the bidding for Ian Wright or Andy Cole gets up to the £5 million mark.

Then you watch the actual Premiership results, amassing points for goals, assists and clean sheets achieved by your players in their respective teams.

The originator's claim that this provides "the ultimate football fantasy" might be a matter for conjecture, but it is proving enormously popular. There are no big cash prizes, only the kudos of becoming a manager of the month or seeing your team come top of your local, or perhaps even the national, league.

It is designed to appeal to the armchair manager in us all. In Alan Walles' words: "It was the whole concept of actually picking a team, particularly when you are bidding against colleagues who, like you, think they know best."

"We all criticise the England manager and local club managers so it

was an ideal opportunity to put into action what we were thinking," says the 48-year-old Chelsea and Chesham fan.

The eight managers from the Nash Arms gather regularly in the pub to compare results and discuss possible transfers.

Wycombe Wanderers fan Simon Burrage, a 32-year-old bank worker from Marlow Road, Lane End, launched a league last year among mates from the Adams Park terraces.

They are the kind of die-hard fanatics who travel to Blues' away games and read magazines like *When Saturday Comes*.

They also do things like guess at the start of the season where all the sides in the Third Division will end up, with points given each week depending on how near your estimate of the placings is to reality.

Fantasy football provides a talking point on those long train journeys to Carlisle and Rochdale, and also gives a focal point for their shared soccer obsession.

"We could be sitting around at a station waiting for a train and hear on the radio that Shearer had scored and you would shout, 'Yes, that's more points for me'."

THE Chairboys League stalwarts, who also include 32-year-old civil servant Ian Blacklidge, from High Wycombe, and Slough-based fellow Blues fan Simon Flower, 29, deny there is anything train-spotterish about such hobbies.

"It might have been for 'anoraks' to start with," argues Simon Burrage, "but it is so popular now you have got people like Frank Skinner and David Baddiel promoting it. It has quite a trendy image."

The whole thing was started by computer buff Andrew Wainstein,

who adapted the game from versions designed for baseball and American football. The 28-year-old is now managing director of Fantasy League Ltd, the London-based firm which oversees all the local leagues and provides the definitive source of points and statistics.

He believes the appeal of bossing around the likes of Alan Shearer and Ian Wright, even in your imagination, is hard to resist. There is also an evident pleasure in simply naming a club.

It is intriguing, too, what the fantasy game does to real football loyalties. Alan Walles, for example, is a Chelsea fan for his sins, yet Chelsea players are markedly absent from his fantasy squad.

What's more, his distress at seeing Blackburn beat the Blues in a recent game on TV was lessened by the fact that one of his fantasy players (Blackburn's Newell) made the first goal, hence giving him points.

"One thing I would say it has done for me is that it's given me a wider interest in other clubs," says Alan. "For instance, I used to have a bit of a hate relationship with Manchester United, but since I bought Eric Cantona that has changed, with all the points he has accumulated for me."

Ultimately, he argues, the qualifications to take part are very simple. "Anyone who does this has got to have a fairly fertile imagination. We are all grown men who haven't grown up."

