

Orange crush

Better facilities have led to the disappearance of a much-loved tradition over the winter months

By NEIL ANDREWS

“Why have you got a set of orange footballs?” enquired my son as we were going through my Subbuteo collection. “Just in case it snows,” I replied, safe in the knowledge that a game of table football has never been called off due to the weather. The joke was lost on him – he had no idea what I was referring to and I doubt he is alone. In an era when you can seemingly buy any colour you desire, the significance of an orange ball appears to have bypassed a whole generation of fans. For them the sight of such a football on a snow-covered pitch would probably be met with overwhelming apathy. What’s so special about a coloured ball?

Yet there was a time when a mere dusting of snow would send schoolboys up and down the country giddy with excitement at the thought of being able to use a ball that otherwise lay dormant at the bottom of their cupboards for the rest of the year. I remember forcing a relative out into a blizzard on a cold Saturday night in the late 1970s just so I could use my orange – albeit plastic – ball in the conditions for which it was intended. This excitement was equalled, if not bettered, when such a ball made an appearance at an actual match, generating a buzz around the ground the moment it was produced by the referee.

Perhaps it was the feeling that you were about to witness something out of the norm that heightened expectations but such games were inevitably more entertaining than those played the week before (although this had probably more to do with the weather conditions than the ball itself). It also helped that a fair share of FA Cup giantkillings took place on a frozen pitch in front of the TV cameras with an orange football, which further added to the mythology.

Surprisingly, the novelty value was still going strong 40 years after the idea of fielding an alternative to the, at the time, new-

fangled white ball during the winter months was first mooted by the Football League. The sight of Kasey Keller trying to come to grips with a tangerine version when a blizzard blew up prior to the south London derby between Millwall and Charlton Athletic provided much hilarity at the Den in December 1995. And the press went into overdrive when a similar ball was used as Chelsea played Tromsø of Norway in arctic conditions during their triumphant 1997-98 Cup-Winners Cup campaign. However, by then such sightings had become sporadic to say the least.

A succession of increasingly mild winters during the 1980s, coupled with improvements in under-soil heating, all but made the need for a “snow” ball redundant. Even when it did snow heavily, legions of fans would be employed by clubs to sweep the

stuff off the pitch to make it playable. Gone were the days when they only ever bothered with the touchlines. By the end of the millennium a new “hi-vis” yellow alternative that had been introduced for when the clocks went back had seemingly replaced the orange ball altogether.

A decade later and games were being called off not because of frozen pitches but due to “health and safety” concerns relating to the frozen concourses by clubs worried about possible legal proceedings. As a result, the opportunities for using a bright orange ball have been few and far between, even though the official ball suppliers to both the Premier and Football Leagues still produce a coloured version for use on snow-covered pitches.

However, their absence is still lamented by fans, as the computer gaming giant EA Sports found out when they neglected to include the option to use one for “snow affected games” in the 2010 version of their popular FIFA game. In this respect the makers of Subbuteo were ahead of the competition, producing an all-weather orange football that could not possibly be used for what it was intended. Yet such was my devotion to recreating that big match atmosphere in my own living room that I once dusted my pitch with my mum’s flour, Sellotaping over the touchlines, just so I could use those very same balls that I recently rediscovered. I’d hazard a guess that I was not the only one that went to such extremes.

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Clockwise from top left Hull v Charlton, Liverpool's Paul Walsh at Luton, Wrexham v West