



Short shrift

In the winter of 1963 an argument about clothing during training caused West Brom's players to take action

By PETER BATEMAN

Most trivia buffs know that The Hawthorns is the highest League ground at 551 feet above sea level. West Bromwich Albion's former training ground at Spring Road is just half a mile away at similar lofty heights – to the east there is no higher ground until the Urals. When it gets cold it gets very cold indeed and training for professional footballers in the uplands of Smethwick was no fun. On December 10, 1963 the Albion players made the seemingly innocent request that they be allowed to train in tracksuit bottoms. Manager Jimmy Hagan refused the request. There followed two weeks of comedy drama that kept the Baggies in the headlines and supporters of rival clubs hugely entertained.

Personalities played a role in what happened. Hagan had only been Albion manager since April that year but relations with his senior players were already strained. He had had a distinguished playing career,



spent mostly with Sheffield United, and, as midfielder Bobby Hope later said, even in his mid-40s could do things with a ball that astonished the Albion players. However, his man-management was poor and tensions between Hagan and the players had been growing. The players were unhappy at what they saw as "boring" training routines and, as the temperatures headed for freezing, asked to be allowed to wear tracksuit bottoms for the first half hour of the sessions until they had warmed up. After the request was refused ten players, led by club captain and England centre-half Don Howe, asked to be transfer listed.

Hagan was unyielding. When asked about criticism of his training methods he replied that the players had not been fit enough. Talking to the local press he attacked those he saw as guilty of the new sport of manager-baiting. With a stand-off ensuing chairman Jim Gaunt called a meeting at The Hawthorns on Friday December 13. After a frank exchange of views with Hagan the players agreed to withdraw their transfer requests and peace was declared.

The truce lasted six days. By the time the players arrived for training the follow-

Top Don Howe (centre) and disgruntled WBA players at the club's Spring Road training ground during the tracksuit bottom strike of 1963

Left Jimmy Hagan, definitely not in a tracksuit
Top right Hagan's car takes a dive in to a canal next to the Spring Road training ground

The players were unhappy at what they saw as "boring" training routines and, as the temperatures headed for freezing, asked to be allowed to wear tracksuit bottoms until they had warmed up

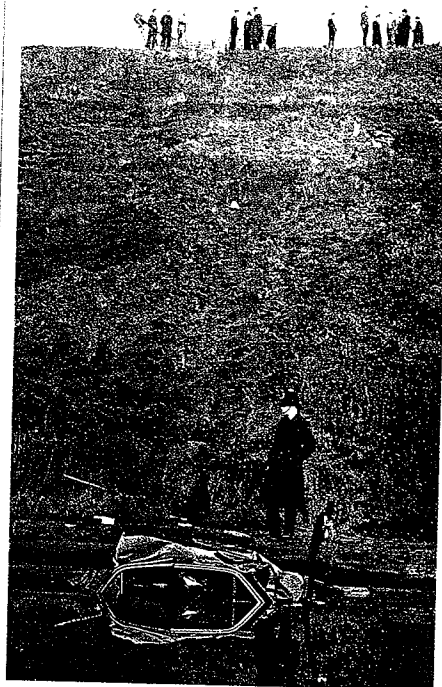
ing Thursday the temperature in Smethwick was down to minus three centigrade. Their request to train in tracksuit bottoms was again declined by the manager and they walked out. The following day a camera crew from local television was present to record the farcical scenes. At ten o'clock the players turned up for training but didn't get changed. At 10.15 Hagan arrived and ordered them to change into shorts. They had a brief meeting, decided that they would not comply and at 10.30 went home, leaving a furious Hagan fulminating about breach of contract. The players were ordered to return in the afternoon but their hopes of a discussion of the tracksuit issue were frustrated. A disgruntled Howe told the *Birmingham Evening Mail*: "This is ridiculous. He [the manager] gave us each a Christmas voucher from the club for four guineas."

On the following Monday, after Saturday's 1-1 draw against Bolton had passed without incident, the stand-off continued. "The first team trained indoors while Hagan made his point by putting on shorts to take

the reserve team session outside. Matters were resolved following a further meeting on Christmas Eve, where the chairman suggested a compromise that the players could train in tracksuit bottoms for the first 15 minutes and then change into shorts. After a two-hour meeting the players agreed to resume training and peace was declared. Gaunt went on local television saying that it was time to let the matter die and that nothing more was to be said by either side.

The experience did not mellow the manager. Not long afterwards when attempting to drive off from the training ground car park he accidentally engaged reverse gear and sent his car careering backwards down a steep bank into the adjacent canal. By the time the players reached the scene Hagan had scrambled out of the car to sit on the bonnet and await rescue. "The trouble with you lot, you're not fit!" he berated them as they pulled him to safety.

Howe, seen by the club hierarchy as the ringleader of the rebellion, was sold to Arsenal the following summer. Hagan went on to win the League Cup in 1966, before being sacked the following year after Albion lost to Third Division Queens Park Rangers in the first final of that competition played at Wembley. His replacement was Alan Ashman, described at the time as "one of the new breed of tracksuit managers". Things were never to be the same again.



Advertisement

LAUGHTER

Includes grouchy putdowns in place of analysis, baffling non-sequiturs while other people are talking and Mark's classic delivery of the time. Wayne's World "Not!" gag now in its third decade.

Eh?

Oh no. This will only encourage him.

NO THE BEST OF MARK LAWRENSEN

It's really funny. NOT!

AS SEEN ON TV

DVD