

What sparked your project?

Back in 2010 I travelled down to Devon (a rural part of England) to watch Queens Park Rangers in a pre-season game against non-league club Tavistock. It was obvious how important the match was to the club and the huge amount of extra funds it generated for them. About a week later I then went to watch my local non-league club Harrow Borough and heard how they were holding a fundraising event to be able to afford new bulbs for the floodlights. I was quite shocked by this, thinking that such a mundane thing wouldn't need such a special effort. Given the financial climate at the time, I thought that they couldn't be the only club in such a position so I resolved to do something about it. By chance I noticed that an international break was coming up and with no Premier League or Championship clubs in action and England playing on the Friday night for the first time, I saw this as my perfect opportunity to do something.

Was it difficult to get some initial feedback from the clubs? How did you convince them to join the campaign?

Initially I launched Non-League Day (NLD) as an event of Facebook between friends – I simply wanted them to go and experience a game at their local non-league club and see what they made of it. I had no intention of directly involving clubs or getting them to do anything special.

As the idea got picked up by the media, interest started to grow and clubs began to contact me, some offering special deals which they asked me to promote to try and attract new fans.

With NLD we list and promote all games down to a certain level regardless of whether clubs actively approach us to be involved or not – this is line with our original ethos of primarily promoting the non-league game rather than specific clubs. We don't want potential fans to miss out on a game in their neighbourhood because a club might not actively support NLD.

That is not to say we don't make every effort to win over as many clubs as possible. Despite emailing and contacting as many as possible by social media, some clubs choose not to get involved while others still don't know it exists but the amount seems to shrink every year.

How many clubs are actually involved?

On our match map we list the fixtures of several hundred clubs for that one day – all that are playing within the top six levels of the non-league structure. We also list matches from lower levels if the clubs approach us asking to be included.

What is their feedback about it? Positive throughout?

Most of the feedback we receive is very positive. If we weren't receiving this news then we wouldn't run the campaign as it takes a lot of time and effort. Some clubs get record crowds or much higher than average attendances. We also hear from a lot of fans who have really enjoyed their experience and in a few cases from those whose lives have ended up becoming totally transformed!

Most of the negative feedback we get is usually from fans and people whose clubs have not been able to host matches, asking why there aren't more than two NLD events a season or they question our scheduling of NLD and the date we've picked. We also get a few non-league fans complaining that they find the event patronising and don't like all the new people coming to their ground even

though financially it can be very beneficial for their club. There are also complaints that clubs often treat these new fans better than their regulars by offering special deals to them over those who go every week – this is something we at NLD have no influence over and actively encourage clubs to make such deals open to everyone. We find ‘Pay What You Want’ schemes are often the most successful with many fans happy to pay the normal price anyway.

Are the crowds bigger only for the day or can the clubs see an improvement in general?

There is a definite spike in attendance on NLD because of the increasing amounts of publicity the event receives so when the media switches its focus elsewhere then interest wanes. Also, most of the Premier League and Football League fans who attend NLD won’t be free to come on other weeks as they will be watching games at those levels.

We do of course hear of lots of individual fans who do go back and even become regulars – two friends who I have introduced to non-league football now go frequently without my encouragement.

It will be interesting to see how many people attend this weekend during the next international break – there is far less being discussed that I am aware of but one or two clubs are trying to make the most of the opportunity.

Do they say that this is a sustainable development? Is this whole project in some way or another supported by the Premier League or the FA or the Football League? Or the Conference?

It is hard to say but if we give up then the focus on non-league football will slip at least partially. While we continue, more and more people and organisations are getting involved.

Although we don’t have any official tie-ins with the FA, Premier League, Football League or Conference – most of them or at least some of their clubs do actively support us.

The professional clubs are usually more than happy to promote NLD and their local non-league clubs with stories on their websites, match magazines and social media channels. Arsenal even lend their luxury team bus to one team (Boreham Wood) to take their players to away matches.

Getting the backing of these clubs and organisations is essential to making the day a success and by stressing that NLD is a celebration rather than a protest it is far easier to get them on board.

What were your special plans for the day?

I ended up attending the match between Dulwich Hamlet and Hampton & Richmond Borough. The south London club ran a ‘Pay What You Want’ scheme and several other events, publicised it really well and ended up drawing a record attendance of nearly 3,000 (they normally receive 600-700) so it was a huge success for them.

This weekend I’m heading to Berlin for Lokalrunde, our first sister event which is taking place in Germany and Switzerland. I wish the organisers every success.