

From the early days of football in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, the amateur clubs of Queens Park in Glasgow, Cardiff Corinthians, Bohemians of Dublin and Cliftonville of Belfast respectively played in leagues against professional sides.

The inclusion of Old Carthusians – a club for old boys of Charterhouse public school - was discussed when the Football League was formed in 1888, but no English amateur side ever joined the Football League. Only one ever tried, the Argonauts.

The club was the idea of Richard ‘Dick’ Sloley, a Cambridge Blue and a World War One veteran with the Royal Army Service Corps. After university, Sloley signed for Corinthians, the leading amateur club for Oxford and Cambridge graduates, who eschewed playing in leagues in favour of friendlies, often against top professional sides.

With football becoming increasingly commercialised, many public schools that had been the bedrock of the early game switched to rugby union, where shamateurism – amateurs accepting secret payments - was less prevalent. At Corinthians, a schism developed between traditionalists favouring the club’s original ethos of showing professionals how to play and pragmatists, who wanted the club to play in a league, such as Sloley. In 1922, Sloley left Corinthians and played out his career with Ealing Association in the Southern Amateur League.

In the 1922/23 season, Corinthians finally agreed to enter the FA Cup, proving popular and relatively successful. In 1923/24, Corinthians knocked out Blackburn Rovers and the club was later given a bye to the third round. In 1925/26, 42,000 fans watched Corinthians host and lose a replay to Manchester City. The next year Corinth progressed to the fourth round by beating Walsall and 56,338 fans filled Crystal Palace to see a 3-1 defeat to Newcastle.

During the 1920s, Corinthians players such as Norman Creek and Kenneth 'Jackie' Hegan were selected for the full England team. In 1927, Sloley retired after winning the Southern Amateur League and Cup double and that winter had a chance encounter in London with fellow amateur football enthusiast, Bob Alaway. The pair went to the East India & Sports Club in St James' Square, central London, where Sloley outlined his plan to save the amateur credo.

Alaway later recalled: "[Sloley's] proposal was a 'Corinthian' club open to all-comers provided they could 'make the grade' ... He foresaw that with so many of the public schools going over to rugby, the Corinthians, unless they amended the qualifications for membership, would gradually fade away as a telling force."

Sloley set up a committee with Alaway and the ex-Corinthian took the role of chairman. The committee remained secret throughout their plans but club notes reveal that the Earl of Lonsdale was president. Harrow headmaster Dr Cyril Norwood and his counterpart at Westminster School, Dr Costley White, were vice presidents.

At the end of 1927, news of Sloley's plans were made public in *Amateur News*, then edited by former amateur footballer, Ivan Sharpe, who wrote: "The *Athletic News* feels that everyone in association football will be interested in the effort to secure that an amateur club shall come into being on a kind of national basis to follow, if late in the day, the long and glorious need of Queen's Park. Such a proposal comes at an opportune moment. The amateur game is healthy, but needs more prominence in a day when the big professional clubs and their countless followers demand such a great proportion of the space in the sporting pages of the newspapers, and consequently so much publicity."

Sloley's club was named the Argonauts after the 'heroes who sailed with Greek warrior

Jason in the Argo for the golden fleece'. The FA did not lend their official support to Sloley's plans after meeting FA secretary Frederick Wall, Sloley said: "Mr Wall was keen about the idea and promised to consult various members of the Football League Management Committee (FLMC)."

In March 1928, the committee of the Third Division South – the competition the Argonauts hoped to join – recommended to its member clubs that the bottom two sides that must apply for re-election be automatically put forward for re-election to the FLMC. This occurred the previous season and to *Athletic News* was a "childish and unsportsmanlike as any movement sport has yielded since the war. This attempt to stifle the Argonauts at birth is a pitiful example of the narrowness of some of our sport."

After meeting the Football League, Sloley had been told that a permanent ground was needed for his putative club, unlike Corinthians, who used Crystal Palace on an ad hoc basis for big home FA Cup ties but played mostly at other club's grounds. In March 1928, Sloley provisionally secured as White City as a home. Brentford and Queens Park Rangers (QPR), the two Football League sides in closest geographical proximity, envisaged losing fans to the Argonauts and told Sloley that they would object to his application.

Sloley had been told that he must submit the names of his players to the League but as most of these players were then with other clubs, he chose not to. His squad would remain secret. In April of 1928, Sloley wrote to all the Third Division South clubs saying he planned to select amateurs without 'restriction of class or grade' and that 25 had been invited. How many had accepted was not disclosed. At this time, the only player publicly connected with Sloley's club was FJC Blake, who had played for the amateur clubs Ilford

and Clapton.

Corinthians' FA Cup stars were an obvious target. Others included amateurs playing regularly in the Football League, such as Herbert 'Rigger' Coates, at Southampton, and working class amateurs, such as Edgar Kail, who in 1929 won three full caps for England while playing for Dulwich Hamlet. If the best amateurs played, the Argonauts could surely emulate Queens Park, then still holding their own in the Scottish First Division.

For established amateur and professional clubs, however, the Argonauts represented a threat to their playing resources. Bob Alaway later conceded that the Argonauts "might have cut across the notions of even certain amateur clubs" but in early spring 1928 Sloley attended a meeting of the general committee at Casuals, another leading amateur club of public schoolboys that played in the Isthmian League. On hearing Sloley, the Casuals' committee agreed that the amateur cause was more important than self-interest.

The players recruited for the first Argonauts' application remain unknown but Sloley assured *Athletic News* that every player named had played in amateur international or representative football during the last two seasons. To win over Brentford and QPR, the Argonauts' also found a new home and agreed to a deal with Arthur Elvin to rent Wembley Stadium.

"There is no doubt that an emphatic impression, decidedly favourable to the amateur club, has been created in Football League circles by this change in plans," wrote *Athletic News* whilst bemoaning the continuing official dearth of support from the FA.

At the 1927 poll, Watford had secured re-election into the Third Division South but Aberdare & Aberaman Athletic, which had significant financial problems, were replaced by Torquay. In June 1928, Torquay had to apply for re-election. This was achieved with

27 votes. Merthyr also retained their League place with 42 votes. Both nominations were later accepted at the FLMC annual general meeting.

The Argonauts had foundered but, despite a recommendation to vote for Merthyr and Torquay from their own committee, 16 members of the Third Division South had voted for Sloley's plans without knowing one of his players. Of the other challengers, Kettering managed three votes, Fletton and Peterborough two apiece.

The Argonauts' failure was not down to Sloley, wrote Sharpe in *Athletic News*. "It is due, partly to a sad lack of vision of the Football Association, which as the *Athletic News* has previously stated, should have taken steps to help the club and assist it to gain a national standing." The newspaper advocated that the Argonauts try again but Sloley told *Athletic News*: "It has been suggested that our case would have been strengthened had we disclosed the names of our players. It would not have been policy to do so, but I did write to the Management Committee, offering to supply the list of our players, officials, etc, in confidence before the meeting. Apart from that, surely it was taken for granted that we were not so totally devoid of common sense to have proceeded so far without definite satisfaction that we could supply adequate playing strength. We did not apply as an individual club in the sense that we were a self-contained unit dependent on a limited number of players. We applied as a principle to establish amateur representation. How far we would have been successful would have been discovered after a trial."

Sloley still had an agreement with Elvin and on September 29 1928, Sloley's old side Ealing took on Hastings & St Leonards in the first amateur game at Wembley. Ealing won that Southern Amateur League match 1-0 but of eight fixtures there, six were lost and an average of 50 souls attended each game. Perhaps there was not demand for

amateur football after all?

Although the Argonauts had been defeated at the vote, the reason for their proposed voyage remained. Asked to preview the 1928/29 football season in *Athletic News*, Bob Alaway wrote: “Not only more public schools but more and more secondary schools are going over to rugby. Later on the effect of this will be felt in soccer circles.”

The underlying strength of the amateur game continued to slide. Of six clubs to enter the 1928/29 FA Cup, none reached the first round but the credo received a fillip in January 1929 when Corinthians – given a bye to the third round - crushed Norwich City at Carrow Road 5-0, demonstrating that amateurs could still match professionals. The next month, Dick Sloley decided that the Argonauts would try for Football League membership one final time and began sounding out potential players.

On February 26 1929 in Bloomsbury Square at the flat of Captain Horace Alaway – brother of Bob - a new committee was formed that included the Alaway brothers, Sloley, Blake and AJ Cranstone. The Earl of Lonsdale remained president and Horace Always took over as chairman. Sloley reinforced the elitist ambitions of the club by securing influential new committee members. Ramsay MacDonald, a former Labour prime minister who would take power again a few months later, agreed to join as one of a number of vice presidents along with Norwood, White, the geologist Sir Arthur Holmes and Sir Charles Wakefield, mayor of London prior to the outbreak of World War One. Sloley was also assured by Admiral Sir Lionel Halsey, a consort of the Royal family, that the Argonauts had the ‘entire sympathy’ of the Prince of Wales, who had met the ex-Corinthian according to family photographs.

A new logo was commissioned at a cost of £10 and 10 shillings, the club affiliated to the

Middlesex County Football Association and the Argonauts' committee, undoubtedly aware of the poor crowds at Wembley for Ealing's matches returned to White City. On March 12, at the suggestion of Blake and seconded by Bob Alaway, the committee again quit White City as QPR had promised to vote down their plans. The Argonauts returned to Elvin to play at Wembley 'on terms and conditions outlined last year'. Elvin even wrote a letter warranting the club's financial provenance to take to the FLMC. A week later, QPR vice chairman J Elliott indicated to Sloley's committee that his club would now support the Argonauts provided that the club stayed at Wembley. Elliott also gave the impression that the support of other third division clubs would be forthcoming in due course.

Sloley again met the FLMC, which agreed that as evidence of their prospective playing strength the names of 15 players who 'have been selected for play in first class amateur representative matches within the last three years' must be forwarded to the league within a fortnight of the 1928/29 season ending. At the Arundel Hotel on the Strand on April 6, a group of prospective players – again kept secret from the FLMC and the public - were invited to dinner.

The star and likely captain was Doctor Ronald Fairbrother, an England amateur international, who captained Northern Nomads to victory in the 1926 Amateur Cup, but the prospective squad all lacked Football League experience. Fairbrother had been on the books of Manchester United and Manchester City but his solitary Football League appearance was with Blackburn Rovers in 1923.

Frederick Gregory was also an England amateur international who had been on the books of Wimbledon and Leyton but his only Football League experience appears to be three

first XI games for Millwall two seasons earlier. Sloley had been on the books at Brentford and his Griffin Park team-mate AH 'Sam' Isaac was also at the Arundel Hotel. Isaac made two Football League appearances for Brentford back in 1924, but was better known as a member of Ealing's double winning side. Also present was HV Probyn, most probably the back FC Probyn, who had also been with Ealing.

There is little evidence of support from Sloley's other former club, Corinthians. Only ML Van Der Borg, credited with four appearances for Corinth and more than 70 for Casuals, was at the Arundel Hotel. Other diners included AM Eastman, who in 1923 had been playing for amateur club Leytonstone, and a player whose name appears to be G Turner.

These names suggest Sloley believed players from amateur clubs would be sufficient to compete in the Football League, rather than amateurs playing already with professional clubs, but few of the players at the Arundel Hotel would have prompted many extra fans through the turnstiles of Third Division South clubs that would host the Argonauts.

On May 3 1929, Dick Sloley and FJC Blake attended a meeting of the Third Division South's member clubs, where he again put forward his case for the Argonauts to play with the professionals.

In his application, Sloley wrote: "So much has been said as to the possible playing strength of the Club, so much as to the many difficulties which will have to be overcome, that there is a danger of losing sight of the fundamental object of the proposal. The real point at issue is - can an Amateur XI compete successfully in the League? If it can, few will deny that to all the other members and to the game itself the Club will be a boon. ... not for many years - even if ever again - will it be possible to revive this movement. The Argonauts is the only amateur club which has ever made such progress in its organization



to be in a position to make an application for admission to the League. To all other applicants a further opportunity will arise – to the Argonauts this is the last. The Argonauts bring something to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division which no other applicant can offer – an entirely new interest. Isn't the experiment worth a chance?"

Sloley pledged to the assembled professionals that if his amateur gentlemen could not hold their own, then the 'remedy' was simple: In 12 months time, the Argonauts could be voted out of the League should they need to seek re-election having finished at the bottom.

The seven clubs bidding for league membership were asked to provide four sets of details to the members of the Third Division South: playing staff, cash balances, average gates and the catchment area within an eight-mile radius of their proposed stadium. Sloley was asked to give the names of his players and financial guarantees to two members of the Southern section committee: he declined to do so. With no games played, the Argonauts could not provide a playing record and Sloley furnished just one set of details on the Argonauts' estimated catchment area around Wembley:

<u>Club</u>	<u>Catchment</u>
Aldershot	175,000
Argonauts	750,000
Exeter	120,000
Gillingham	200,000
Kettering	55,000
Llanelli	125,000

Thames 2,500,000

The meeting closed with those clubs seeking re-election – Exeter and Gillingham – to be recommended for re-election by the FLMC regardless of the outcome of the vote. Sloley told his committee in a meeting at Captain Horace Bailey’s flat on May 14. The next meeting was postponed until after the vote at the League’s annual general meeting on June 3 1929, when the Argonauts managed just six votes. Exeter romped home with 42 votes, Gillingham managed 35. Both clubs returned to the Third Division. Of the other would-be members, Aldershot managed five votes, Kettering and Thames polled a vote apiece and Llanelli got no support.

Had the lack of information on the Argonauts been an issue? The other prospective new members all gave their financial position, but this was clearly no great influence. Exeter had a balance of a mere £226 and were re-elected. The nascent Thames club allegedly had £2,800 in the bank and received just one vote.

This latest election came at a time of much turmoil in the Football League. Clubs in the Third Division South were only associate members. With no voice or vote, they were militating for change. Perhaps the members of the Third Division South were wary of being able to count on the support of a club of amateurs or, more likely, simply followed their own committee’s mandate and acted out of pure self-interest.

*Athletic News* described the ballot as a ‘Waste of Time’. In this same issue, an official from an unidentified prospective new Third Division South member, which – given the exclusive information on the Argonauts that regularly appeared in the newspaper – may well have been Dick Sloley, described the following scene: “The vote was not taken by

ballot but by an open show of hands, and ... some clubs refrained from voting at all, rather than antagonise old friends. I could not help feeling I had wasted my time in attending the meeting, and had I been aware of the extraordinary method of dealing with applications, I certainly should not have attended. One can only marvel at the way the whole thing was dealt with to the prejudice of at least five of the applicants. I maybe wrong, but it seemed to me to be a breach of the fundamental rules of conducting a meeting of its kind.”

News of the Argonauts’ initial plans had been on the front page of two successive issues of *Athletic News* but the club’s third and final attempt to join the Football League received hardly any coverage – even though Ivan Sharpe remained editor. One reason appears to be Sloley’s consistent refusal to identify his players. In response to a readers’ letter advocating the Argonauts’ cause in January 1930, Ivan Sharpe wrote: “While we have said more than once that the F.A. should have assisted the Argonauts, the [FLMC] did not interfere with their election, which was left to the clubs. We believe that the Argonauts would secure election if they could satisfy the clubs that they could maintain a reasonably successful side and last out the season. That is where the F.A. should have helped.”

FA backing may have prompted some better amateur players to publicly join the Argonauts, but the support that Sloley claimed Wall had given him in 1928 was never forthcoming. The Third Division South clubs clearly lacked altruism towards the amateur cause but knowledge that the Argonauts possessed top players who would draw in fans that had turned out to support Corinthians in the FA Cup would certainly have been an influential factor. A few years after Sloley’s final failed bid, Wall wrote his

autobiography and did not mention the Argonauts once.

Writing years later, Bernard Joy, the journalist who was the last amateur to play for England after featuring in 1936 while at Arsenal, wrote: ‘The League clubs were not satisfied as to the playing staff and ground facilities’. As a player for Casuals in the 1930s, Joy would have knowledge of what was going on yet Norman Ackland, who covered the amateur game for decades – often under the pseudonym Pangloss – wrote that ‘some of the greatest amateurs of the day agreed to turn out for [the Argonauts]’.

In their third and final bid for Football League membership, Sloley’s nascent team failed to secure a single vote. As a newspaper of record, *Athletic News* simply chronicled the result. There was no front page outcry. Dick Sloley’s Argonauts had never set sail, the voyage had foundered before even leaving port. For all his early championing of the club’s aspirations and the amateur cause, Sharpe’s autobiography, *40 Years in Football*, published in 1955 does not mention Sloley or the Argonauts.

Sloley’s hoped to garner a giant squad, but the number of top class amateurs was dwindling. He needed the best to play regularly but only well-off amateurs could afford the time to train and play 42 fixtures for the Argonauts. None of the Corinthians that had competed with the professionals in the FA Cup during the 1920s played so many games. Norman Creek was a regular for Corinthians between 1919 and 1931 but only managed 146 appearances in 12 years.

The Corinthians went further into decline, but the Casuals blossomed as the public school boys embraced league competition. More than 70 public schoolboys asked to join Casuals in 1930 – a sign that the public school boy generation wanted to league football and the Argonauts could perhaps have succeeded. Some of the players that joined Casuals

were of the highest standard. When the club won the Amateur Cup in 1935/36 in their first appearance in the final since 1893/94, the side included the England international Bernard Joy.

Shortly before the outbreak of World War Two in 1939, Corinthians merged with Casuals and after WW2 found themselves in a league after all as Casuals still played in the Isthmian League but Dick Sloley never saw this, dying in October 1946.

*Sources: Argonauts' committee notes, Athletic News, 'League football and the men who made it' by Simon Inglis (Willow 1988), 'Fifty Years of Football' by Sir Frederick Wall (Cassell 1935), 'Football League players' records 1888-1939' by Michael Joyce (Soccerdata 2004), 'Play Up Corinth – a History of the Corinthian Football Club' by Rob Cavallini (Stadia 2007) The Times, 'Wembley-The Complete Record' by Glen Isherwood (SportsBooks 2006), 'A Casual Affair' by Rob Cavallini (Dog'N'Duck Publications 2009). Stanley Matthews Football Album (Marks & Spencer 1949).*