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How the fixture list is prepared

The Clydesdale Bank Premier League fixtures for 2009/10 will be published at 10am on Wednesday.

The publication of the fixture list always produces some lively debate - here is the SPL's guide as to how the schedule is drawn up.

First Steps

The first step is to pull together what is referred to as the **fixtures skeleton**, which incorporates all the international and European dates.

The next step is to decide the start of the season and it was agreed with the SFA that it would kick off on August 15 to help with Scotland's preparations for the key game in Norway. Due to the FIFA 2010 World Cup, the season will end on May 8/9.

With the start and end dates decided, the SPL then sits down with the SFA and SFL to agree what dates will be used for league matches and when cup ties and replays will be played.

The 'SPL Computer'

Once the fixture skeleton has been agreed and approved, work can begin in scheduling the specific fixtures. For this season, the SPL again teamed up with Canadian specialists, **Optimal Planning Solutions** (OPS), to do this. OPS were recommended to the SPL by the French League (LFP) and also carry out similar work for the NFL and MLB in the USA.

With 12 clubs, 38 rounds of fixtures and 228 games to schedule there are thousands of different combinations of schedules for the SPL to compare – too many to deal with manually. OPS provide the software that does the hard work and analyses all the alternatives and, based on a penalty point system, produces the best fixture list set against the SPL's requirements.

With last season being the first year that OPS were involved, the SPL carried out a root and branch review of the process. The **SPL Fixtures Working Group** led this process which is made up of representatives from Celtic, Inverness CT, Hearts, Hibernian, Motherwell, Rangers and the SPL.

The SPL club managers also had the chance to feed in their thoughts and suggestions via the Football Working Group meetings which took place last season.

After that review process, with the parameters set, the buck stops with the SPL Executive to finalise and approve the detail of the fixture list.

Complicated

Iain Blair plays a lead role throughout. Commenting on the process, he said: "Pulling together the fixture list can be **complicated**. We need to try and factor in a whole range of issues which can often clash with each other. The review we conducted last season was worthwhile and produced lots of ideas, most of which we have managed to accommodate for the 09/10 season."

So, what has been accommodated for this season then?

Seedings

The top six/bottom six split system which is used in the SPL is widely debated but has certainly created some drama since its introduction in 2000.

This year's fixtures are based on the final league table from 08/09. So if Rangers, Celtic, Hearts, Aberdeen, Dundee United and Hibernian make up the top six in 09/10 then all clubs will play 19 home games and 19 away games. And clubs in each half of the split will play their opponents twice at home and twice away.

Most of the fixtures have also been reversed from last season. For example, the first Edinburgh derby in 08/09 was at Easter Road and next season it will be at Tynecastle. We have managed to achieve this for 85% of the fixture pairings.

Home/Away Sequencing

"The feedback from the fans is that they prefer to play at home one week and away the next and so on through the season. It is **mathematically impossible** to do this though," said Blair.

Blair added: "What the clubs did want to see was to have alternating home/away fixtures at key points in the calendar, namely across the first four games of the season, over the festive period and in the run-in to the split. We have managed to do this for all 12 clubs.

"Craig Levein also brought forward a suggestion that all clubs should have three out of the first six games of the season at home and three away. This seems a straightforward point, but we did have to programme that into the system and again this has been sorted out."

Tough Travel

Related to this is the issue of **travelling distance** for fans going to away games midweek or over the festive period. The SPL have looked back over seasons 07/08 and 08/09 and tried to avoid repeated trips again this season.

Also, across the four midweek matches scheduled, most clubs will play at home twice and away twice.

Derbies

This season also marks the **return of the New Year derbies**. With a round of fixtures scheduled for January 2/3, the SPL took the decision to reinstate the traditional derby fixtures across this weekend.

Blair said: "We have kept the derbies apart in the past to make sure each one can have its turn in the spotlight. We thought that it was time to bring back the New Year fixtures. The other derbies will be split up through the season but there is something special about these matches at this time of year. It will work for fans in terms of reduced travel and it will work for TV."

Derbies also need some special attention when it comes to **Europe and the National side**. For example, the Fixtures Working Group felt that there should be no Old Firm derby scheduled before or after key European dates, such as the play-off legs for qualification into the Champions League.

The SFA will also be pleased to see that there are no Old Firm games immediately after any Scotland internationals next season.

Policing Issues

The police also play a key role in the process. Public safety is paramount, and they are keen to ensure that two high profile fixtures are not scheduled for the same time in the same city. This is particularly relevant in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee.

The Dundee United-Dundee situation is a bit more complex but the dialogue between the SPL and the SFL has helped. Blair said: "There are only two weekends next season where both are at home. On one of those weekends, Dundee United will play on Saturday with Dundee on Sunday and vice versa on the other weekend. This was fair and will avoid some of the issues we faced last season."

Police forces from across Scotland will also feed in requests to avoid games in their area on certain days. This will allow the police to manage their resources effectively when other large sporting, political or cultural events are taking place in a region.

Head-to-Head Spacing

In the early years of the split, the SPL used to create a fixture list for rounds 1-11 which was simply repeated again in the second phase for rounds 12-22 and then again in the third phase for 23-33. So, if Celtic played St Mirren in round 1, then they would meet again in rounds 12 and 23.

The Fixtures Working Group took the decision to mix up the fixtures within each phase as this also gives us **more flexibility** with regards to things like derby matches or police requests.

Blair added: "We also had a look at whether we should deliberately spread out games against the perceived top teams and perceived weaker teams. But the clubs agreed that we were venturing into dangerous territory here. For a start, it wouldn't be right for us to sit and judge who is likely to have a strong season and who isn't. We decided to steer clear of this one."

A Challenge

Summing up, Blair said: "Creating the fixture list is a challenge every year, there is **more and more scrutiny** on how this is done. The review last season and our work with OPS has improved things but we will take stock next season to move things on again.

"There will always be conflicts, though. We have to focus on what is best for the competition as a whole. We can't claim to have produced the perfect fixture list, if such a thing exists, but we will certainly do our best to produce a balanced one in line with the parameters agreed by our clubs."