

Weekly Letter

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Up the Vale!

by Dónal Thompson



Steve McPhee in action for Port Vale

Supporting Real Madrid and Barcelona is all well and good. But it's not exotic, is it? Why don't you be a Port Vale fan too?

Port Vale Football Club was founded in 1876 ; the year when Custer lost the Battle of Little Big Horn and 26 years before Real Madrid came into existence.

"The Vale" are based in Stoke-on-Trent, England – a city so famous for it's ceramics that people call the city "The Potteries".¹ Every Saturday for 127 football seasons it has been workers from the potteries who have shivered, sweated, screamed and dreamed on the terraces of Vale park.



This insoluble link is reflected in the club badge which shows a pottery oven in the bottom left. The club badge of Stoke-on-Trent's other football team no longer has such a homage to their fans.

Anyone can support Real Madrid or Barcelona (and yes, even my adopted team Real Sociedad!). It's easy. It's the shareholders and showbusiness side of soccer. Posh and Becks. Dosh and bucks.

But to be a Vale fan takes character. It's cold in Stoke in winter. I mean really, really cold. In San Sebastián, where I live, it is surprising if the thermometer falls below zero. In Stoke it's surprising if it doesn't. A football scarf is not a fashion accessory for the Vale fan. It's part of a life-support system.

Port Vale will not be competing in the Champions' League next season. They will be playing in the English Second Division and as always their biggest rivals will be themselves.

Port Vale seek to surpass their own limitations. They know that winning trophies and reaching glory do not take the place of hard work - they will be a consequence of hard work.

In the TV series Star Trek , the Vulcan Mr Spock would sometimes say of a planet "There's life, Jim. But not as we know it." That's how I felt about soccer when I came to this country.

Once when I was 9 years old I was watching Port Vale train in Tunstall Park. At the end of the session the manager Gordon Lee sent the team running up Victoria Park Road back to the Port Vale stadium. I approached Gordon Lee and asked for an autograph. He called the entire team back – most of them more than 100 metres into their run – and they all ran back and signed autographs for me. And not a bodyguard or Image Consultant in sight!

In the music industry all the hype and column inches go to trashy pop. But real music fans and genuine connoisseurs listen to rock 'n' roll.

Ladies and gentlemen of Spain support your European dream teams of course – but keep an eye on the valiant Port Vale. Pop into their website at the weekends and see how they got on.

"Up the Vale!"
Soccer's rock and roll.

Have a look at <http://www.port-vale.co.uk>

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¹ "Las Alfarías"