

# All Tomorrow's (Fixture Working) Parties

*Ever wondered how the fixture list is created?*



**P versus NP is a riddle that has confounded mathematicians, scientists, and computer programmers for decades. Conceived in 1971 it's one of seven problems that the Clay Mathematics Institute will give you a million dollars for proving (or disproving).**

The gist is this – imagine a problem that can be solved relatively easily by a computer but which has an almost infinite number of permutations. An example might be the creation of an entire season's football fixture list spread across four divisions of 92 teams. Now try and definitively prove which specific permutation, out of all those billions, is ultimately 'best'. Succeed and you're a millionaire. Good luck.

Yet every season the Fixtures Working Party (FWP) tries, in its own small way, to do just that. Made up of a specially selected group of representatives from the Football Association (FA), Premier League, Championship, League One, League Two, and fixture company DataCo, it comes together in a meeting chaired by the Football League.

## Travel trials & tribulations

The software which outlines the 'draft' fixture list does not incorporate 'distance' into its methodology. This means fans are reliant on Ian's eagle-eye to spot problematic extra-long midweek or bank holiday journeys.

There have been academic papers which claim to solve the problem of tricky journeys over the Christmas period but it's enough to blow our tiny minds. Take *Scheduling English football fixtures over holiday periods* by Nottingham University (G.Kendall, 2008) - we've included some of the calculations below. Easy isn't it?

*If team i plays team j on Boxing Day, then team j cannot play team i on New Year's Day.*

$$\sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^n x_{i,j} x_{j,i} = 0$$

The role of the FWP is oversight and tweaking, rather than outright construction. Contrary to popular belief the fixture list isn't spat out by a giant computer lacking human intelligence and ingenuity. It's a carefully crafted mix - part human art, part computer science. And it even takes into account the views of fans.

Sitting as the fans' representative on that fixtures committee is the FSF's Ian Todd who, more than any other supporter, understands the complexities involved in setting up an entire season's calendar. Every February he meets with the other representatives of our national game and looks over the draft fixture list which has already been 'sequenced' by computer.

Ian explains: "There are so many factors to be worked in before even arranging domestic fixtures. The first is the international calendar which has to be laid over the top – World Cup qualifiers, the Euros, and agreed international friendly dates. Once that has been done you overlap the UEFA competitions – the Europa League and Champions League.

"You also have to consider FA Cup rounds and replays, while the end of the season can be conditioned by the Euros or World Cup. Minimum release dates for international tournaments also apply which is why the Championship play-offs finish one week before the others this year, so that their players can be released for the Euros. Next season also starts late because of Olympics football too."

It's enough to give you a headache and Ian hasn't even started on the domestic calendar proper. Around the time the FWP meets, every club receives a questionnaire which will help shape the season. Do you prefer midweek games on a Tuesday or Wednesday? >>

## Computer says woe

**TV hell?** Unhappy about your team's game being moved from Saturday 3pm to an awful time for TV? That's out of the fixture committee's control. "TV can mess plans up by moving a game from a carefully considered Saturday to a Monday night," says Ian. This can be a nightmare for away fans if the journey is an especially long one.

**Conspiracy?** Ian is adamant that Sky's 'Super Sunday' is not a dastardly scheduling plot dreamed up by Murdoch and co but rather a clever piece of marketing which highlights one or two weekends from 38 with the tastiest fixtures. It's inevitable that on a couple of weekends per season more than one 'huge' game will take place. Sky just market that brilliantly so it seems they have more influence that they actually do.

**Club bias?** Think your club is treated unfairly? Think again. Way before fixtures are officially published clubs have the opportunity to appeal for changes. If your side has started every season with an away game for as long as you can remember, it's coincidence not conspiracy. And they can request a change if it's a problem.

- » 7.45pm or 8pm kick-offs? Are there any home dates you wish to avoid? QPR don't want to play on the same date as the Notting Hill Festival, Liverpool don't want to clash with the Grand National, and so on.

Crucially, clubs are also 'paired' so that, say, Arsenal and Spurs don't play at home on the same weekend. Pairing local rivals might seem a relatively straightforward task but never underestimate the potential for problems when it comes to football.

Ian explains: "Pairings don't change too often, although promotions and relegations can affect them along with other considerations. For example, Swindon and Oxford requested not to play on the same day at home because they shared the same stewarding contractor who couldn't provide stewards to both on the same day!"

Boxing Day and New Year's Day fixtures are a particular bone of contention for clubs and fans. While

supporters would often like to play their local rivals on these days (because public transport is non-existent) the commercial departments at clubs certainly don't. Bigger crowds are guaranteed anyway as people just want to get out of the house over Christmas so clubs 'save' their derby for an otherwise quiet weekend, rather than blow it on a bank holiday date that would prove popular regardless.

Ian keeps a close eye on festive fixtures to ensure fans have relatively nearby games and asks for a long-list of midweek games to review for potential problems. "The Premier League normally has three midweek fixtures over the course of a season, the Championship has nine, Leagues One and Two have five or six. I don't think they used to care about giving people very long midweek trips but they got fed up with me complaining and now they do try.

## Sequencing

Clubs are 'paired' so that home and away fixtures alternate and do not clash – the last thing the local police or transport authorities want is two local rivals playing on the same day in the same city. But this causes a problem for fixture compilers.

Let's imagine Manchester United (A) are paired with Manchester City (B). Arsenal (also A) are paired with Spurs (also B). As A and B rotate home/away on a weekly basis there's no chance that Arsenal and Spurs play at home on the same date. Great. But that also means Arsenal

will always play at home on the same weekend as Manchester United play at home. So how do Arsenal play away at Manchester United (or City at Spurs) when this would break the finely balanced formula?

The answer lies in sequencing. As well as pairing clubs, the football fixture folk also split the calendar into eight blocks and draw a line across the entire fixture list on eight different Saturdays through the season. On those dates teams will have a second home game (or away game) in a row. Sequencing is the oil that prevents the pairing system from jamming.

“Of nine dedicated midweek fixtures in the Championship only two or three games will be longer distances. I know Hull and Brighton played each other midweek as did West Ham and Middlesbrough but apart from that there weren’t many. It’s impossible to accommodate everyone but I think they’re doing a good job now.”

There’s little doubt that long distance midweek fixtures frustrate the away fan more than almost anything else. Being on a pitch black motorway at midnight after an away annihilation is no-one’s idea of fun. But move that fixture to a more fan-friendly Saturday afternoon and there might be dozens of untold knock on effects - it isn’t always just about your club.

The fixture compilers acknowledge their system isn’t perfect, it needs constant refinement, and sometimes they have to choose the “least worse option” that might help half-a-dozen clubs and hinder one. More often than not you’re one of the half-dozen and benefit from this while others lose out without you ever realising.

To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, you can please some of the fans all of the time, and all of the fans some of the time, but you can’t please all of the fans all of the time. And if you know different, there’s a million dollar prize with your name on it.

## Fixtures Flow Chart

**STEP 1:** International calendar announced by FIFA/UEFA

**STEP 2:** Football League, Premier League, and FA schedule Johnstone’s Paint Trophy, Carling Cup, and FA Cup fixtures (and replays)

**STEP 3:** Draft #1 is produced by computer

**STEP 4:** Fixtures Working Party (the FA, Premier League, Championship, League One, League Two, DataCo, and FSF) discuss draft with particular attention to midweek fixtures, the festive period, and the opening/closing weeks of season. Questionnaires are also sent to clubs around this time to identify any club-specific issues

**STEP 5:** Draft #2 is produced with a resolution of identified problem and takes into account promotions, relegations, and play-offs. This is a final step for the Fixtures Working Party to discuss any requests which haven’t been met

**STEP 6:** The fixture list is ready to be published on Monday 18th June 2012

