“PROGRAMMES, GET YER PROGRAMMES... ANYONE...?”

Matchday magazines may seem to many people like a relic from the past, but even at non-league level, clubs still publish them – though not always through choice.

Words Richard Edwards, Photography Jill Jennings

They may not know it, but fans of non-league teams in the North East, as well as the clubs themselves, have a lot to thank Mike Raimer. The 59-year-old from Middlesbrough doesn’t work his thing on a matchday, however.

It was announced that from the start of the 2013-14 Northern League season, any club failing to produce a match day programme would be fined. Those fines begin at £50 and can potentially reach as much as £200.

Yes, you read correctly. Clubs have to come up with the goods for each home match, at least in Step 1 to Step 6 of the non-league pyramid (the fourth tier of English football). The rule itself is part of the standards set by all divisions across England’s non-league system, which are then approved by the FA. The fines are designed to be a big enough deterrent for clubs to think twice before not producing one,” says Mike Robinson, chairman of the Ryman Football League, who oversee three leagues in London and the south west.

“Programmes are a good thing and our league follows the official guidelines set by the FA. We have a duty to maintain standards and ensure that fans are well informed about the game,” he says. Raimer admits that he has never thrown away a programme, some 53 years after he watched his first competitive match. The week RT catches up with him, that collection has increased by five, Raimer having watched Thamebury, Newham Town, Sunderland Ryhope Community Association, Boldon CA and Bedroom Reelings over the past six days.

His only brush with the professional game that week came when he sat down in front of the TV to watch his beloved Middlesbrough take on Charlton in the Championship. The match was notable for the absence of Boro boss Alex McLeish and the presence of a coffin that illustrated the plight of Charlton under their current owner – hardly a comfort to warm the soul. The chill wind of a Tuesday night in Seaburn had mercifully seemed so appealing.

“The position of someone who supports Ramsbottom United is as great as someone who supports Manchester United,” says programme dealer John Dee. “The fact that they play in the Premier League and the other in the Bar Slik doesn’t matter.”

It’s right. In many ways that position is the glue that holds the English game together, and makes non-league programmes almost as desirable as their Football League equivalent. A quick glance at eBay shows plenty are up for sale: some from FA Amateur Cup finals, others from more obscure matches, such as these involving a team many people won’t know.

“Huddersfield United programmes sell very well,” says Dee. “It’s harder to get non-league programmes from before the war era.”