A big farewell to 'Mr AJAX'

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THE funeral last Wednesday of John Brustman was the one of the largest many can recall at Springvale Chevra Kadisha Cemetery.

The huge crowd spilled outside the shtiebel and represented a snapshot of the Melbourne Jewish community. Black-hatted Chabadniks mingled with AJAX footballers in their club tracksuit tops. Most Melbourne Jewish community organisations were represented, and in many cases by the top brass.

The eulogy touched on the myriad groups that John and his wife Helen were involved in. They had no children, so many of these groups – particularly the North Eastern Jewish Centre, United Israel Appeal, Chabad House of Malvern and the AJAX Football Club – were the couple's family, and will no doubt remain important to Helen.

AJAX, in particular, is grieving again. In April, club patron and former champion Richard Pratt passed away. Last week it was John Brustman.

Mourners heard how Brustman served as a goal umpire for 621 matches. AJAX president Brian Goldberg did the maths and said it added up to about 30 seasons of waving the white flags.

His commitment to writing the match reports for *The AJN* lasted much longer. Brustman's first AJAX match report appeared on the back page of *The AJN* on April 19, 1962. "AJAX win opener" told of a "sound" 26-point win over Brunswick at Brunswick.

In the style of the dearly departed *Sporting Globe*, Brustman recounted each match, almost blow for blow. His first match report concluded with: "when Kalman handpassed to Burstin who goaled, the game was sewn up".

Brustman covered the Jackas nearly every week for the next 40 years and his words carried a big stick.

As club historian Barry Markoff recalled last week: "If John wrote 'AJAX will need to lift its intensity if it wants to win next week', then you can be assured the team hadn't been playing very well."

"His writing was very instructive and he often used the reports to motivate the team for the next week."

Club legend Michael Ritterman added: "You never got a mention in the paper unless you earned it and he was very good at getting to the point in what he wrote."

Brustman gave up the weekly *AJN* match reports a few years back, but couldn't resist the urge to write about the club he loved. In the last few years he embraced the internet, writing snippets and going into bat for it in the always opinionated, and often hostile, amateur football section of the popular Big Footy message board under the username Mazal.

He clearly knew his football. When he wrote early in 1967 that 16-year-old debutant Michael Ritterman had the makings of a "future star", he was right on the money. Ritterman went on to become the club's most decorated player.

Brustman was the first AJAX identity and one of just four, to date, to be honoured by the Victorian Amateur Football Association (VAFA) with a certificate of merit. He was honoured again by the VAFA with a lifetime achievement award at the opening game of this season.

This meant he was well connected within the wider amateur football fraternity and Markoff recalls receiving a few tip-offs from Brustman about Jewish players from rival clubs, who were thinking of switching clubs. Often, these players would end up at AJAX.

"He wasn't just a Saturday follower of the club. He was interested in the club all year around and would often phone during the week, out of season, just to see how things were shaping up for the following season. He really was Mr AJAX."

AJAX won on Saturday, defeating Parkdale at Parkdale by 44 points, the club's first ever win at that ground. Mr AJAX would have been particularly proud.

John Brustman (right) watches a game from the sidelines with another AJAX stalwart, Rod Morley.   Photo: Peter Haskin

AJAX WIN OPENER

BY JOHN BRUSTMAN

AJAX Football Club commenced the 1962 season with a sound 7-10-52 to 3-8-26 win over Brunswick Football Club at Brunswick.

..Kicking with a strong wind in the first term, AJAX threw away countless opportunities on the forward line. Team-

A taller, stronger and far superior team showed AJAX how the game should be played.

John Brustman's first AJAX report appeared in *The AJN* on April 19, 1962.