



Saturday 4th August 2018



Southend 2 - Doncaster Rovers 3



Summer; Furnace like temperatures, screaming kids and everybody else's choice of music! But at least this one did have some mitigating circumstances, including a World Cup tournament in which England actually turned up. Of course we all knew that they would throw it all away eventually, as they did! That said, at least we did it to ourselves. Much better than suffering from one of gods misplaced handy pandies or a biased, corrupt, blind official who failed to see the ball cross the line.

Now though, all that is in the past, although that damn star does still appear rather determined to keep on doing its death ray routine for at least another week or so. It's driven Denzil to hiding in the dark. Over the past few months he's spent more hours sitting in the backseats of cinemas than he has driving a desk. No change there many of you might think. But whereas he once avoided work by following healthy pursuits such as chasing pretty sheep up and down a mountainsides; he is now much more likely to be seen slumped down in a seat clutching a bag of popcorn.

In contrast, Trigs spent many of the summer months abroad. A few years back he brought a plane ticket to Cyprus. He duly went and thoroughly enjoyed it. Indeed, he so liked his little adventure that he decided that it should become an annual pilgrimage. Trigger therefore has been a regular on Cyprus Airways ever since. Given the amount of tucker that he brings to away trips one does rather have to wonder what chaos might ensue should the airline ever decide to investigate the contents of his hand luggage!

Grandad too indulged himself in a spot of annual hooliganism. Having uncovered the huge tent like structure on his driveway to reveal a motorists vision of hell, he and his equally delinquent wife, took it upon themselves to perform the role of a rolling traffic block. Towing his caravan across the country at snail like speeds whilst enjoying the view of hundreds of frustrated drivers in his rear mirror.

Now, despite a sad travesty of what was once regarded as a national treasure declaring 'fake' news (The BBC had announced that football was not recommencing until next weekend), the start of a brand new season had attracted them all back to the centre of the universe. So there was Grandad seated all close to the front of the West Stand. Nicely situated so that he could have a quiet conversation with the linesman from time to time. Whilst, high above, up in the Thunderbirds eyrie, Trigger was burying his head inside a newspaper pretending to be solving a crossword. The fact that the answers were helpfully provided written upside down at the bottom of the page going quite some way towards explaining why some people thought that he was performing ostrich impressions!.

Of Denzil though there was no sign. We weren't too worried though because, although he lives closest to the ground, his route does take him past shops with names like Miss Selfridges and The Body Shop. The flight crew of Cyprus Airways might well be rather startled should they ever take a look at Trigger's hand luggage, but their experience would be as nothing to that of any Roots Hall steward bold enough to ask Denzil to reveal just what was inside his man bag!

Last season our pitch, quite rightly, received a lot of criticism. Now though, completely re-laid and carefully tended, it looks a picture and a fantastic surface upon which to play a game of football. Trigger, his mind still concentrated upon 3 Down: (Small, sleepy creature that lives in a teapot, 8 letters) was barely aware of it. But Denzil, who had now arrived amid a cloud of scent, being someone who had preferred the allure of a

flickering screen to attending any of the pre-season friendlies, was trying to compare the pictures of players in his match day program to those running around the pitch warming up.

He had a lot of homework to catch up upon as Chrissy Powell had been very busy during the summer with six new faces joining the team. A defender, Harry Lennon, three midfielders, Luke Hyam, Timothee Dieng and someone we got to know last season whilst on loan from Scunny, Sam Mantom, whilst upfront/wide we signed Sam Barratt and Tom Hopper. Welcome to the club guys!

Sadly, of young Yearwood there was no sign. Injured in the last game of last season he has yet to kick a ball in anger, even in training. Seems we might have to wait a while before he lights up our midfield again. But at least there is a reasonable chance of seeing him in action soon. Certainly compared to a sighting of long term sick note, Rob Kiernan. Ron will have time to submit several stadium applications to the council long before we get to see our missing defender all kitted up!

Blues kicked off, attacking the North Bank, and the opening exchanges revealed how much both teams had been looking forward to the opening day. However once the initial frenzy had settled down it was our visitors who looked the most menacing. With useful looking players up front and a busy midfield that was winning every aerial battle, it looked like we were in for a bit of a test.

In Mantom and Hyam, we have the makings of a midfield that will be tough to get through, save for a high ball approach. It would be wrong though to accuse Doncaster of that, but when the ball did get airtime, so they would gain possession of it. Had Dieng, a much taller player, not been recovering from injury (He was on the bench) it would have been interesting to see how things might have played out differently. As it was though, their dominance in the air was giving them a distinct early advantage.

That said, new club captain, Oxley, could have easily emulated Trigs who was still stealing surreptitious glances at his crossword puzzle, without any problems; so well was our defence dealing with the situation. Indeed, Donny were not to have shot on target until early in the second period when they opened up the scoring.

Instead it was we who gradually began to completely take over the game and, but for some brilliant (On occasion, lucky) saves by their goalkeeper, we would have been well ahead by the break. Hopper looks to be a good signing, winning balls in the air and making productive runs into space. Hyam and Mantom were running midfield whilst Lennon was having a tidy game at the back.

Doncaster might well have made the more confident start but, as we started to get our game together, it was we who were running the game. So, they decided to change it. Not by upping theirs but rather by downing it. Their players continually finding the need to collapse on the ground as if they had been hit by a bulldozer rather than the fleeting shadow of one of our players. Aided and abetted by one of the laziest refs ever to grace (Yeah!!) our pitch, their underhand and downright cheating tactics began to break up play.

Then a drinks break (Really? Ok so it was hot and muggy. But even cheating Leeds under Don Revie never suddenly left the pitch on masse to indulge in a tea break!) When plenty of water bottles were scattered alongside the touchlines, completing the process by which we had begun to lose our momentum. Roll on winter!

The 'Official' halftime soon followed and Doncaster left the pitch congratulating themselves upon how well they had 'managed' the situation. Mr 'Afternoons stroll along the promenade' had certainly leant them a hand though, totally ignoring most of their fouls. Many of which were very reminiscent of those performed by Tunisia and Panama a few weeks earlier in Russia. He had also pulled a 'Nelson' when Hopper was brought down inside the area with only the goal keeper to beat. Even Specsavers wouldn't have the cheek to feature that particular incident in one of their adverts!

We weren't totally blameless though for a virgin scorecard. Yes, some of our shots had been well taken but other chances had been scorned. Chrissy has not hidden the fact that he is looking for at least one more player upfront and on this evidence, Hopper apart, you can see why. The age of our team has been lowered considerably, leaving players like Cox and Kightly gasping for breath. Their experience is a valuable asset to a

team still finding both its feet and identity, but cameo roles must surely lie in wait for them later in the season.

Much speculation surrounded Brown's halftime speeches; events that left his players still in a trance long after the whistle for the second half to commence had been blown. Few doubts however existed about the phrases that had been employed by Doncaster's manager's during this break though as his team came out determined to emulate the style of play employed by other teams that wear striped shirts up North. Not sure whether it was meant to be league or union though.

Either way, tackles employing feet were now oh so passé to the Rovers players. Instead Eddie Waring would have been salivating at the mouth had he witnessed some of their waist high challenges that, whilst gracing Twickenham, had no part to play in the more senior game. Trouble was 'Mr, oh isn't this sunshine doing my tan good' didn't feel any need to intervene as Doncaster's tactics just got more and more blatant. Eventually, once we had conceded three goals, he did book one of their players. But the foul they had committed was one that fully merited a red card!

A rare mistake by Turner opened the way for Doncaster to score their first goal; the second was the result of a fine shot on the turn from just outside the area whilst their last was the sort of goal that any side that should have been two up rather than two behind concedes. The big question therefore was how would we respond.

The sort of people who should have "I will only support you when you are winning" tattooed upon their foreheads were already announcing their call on that point, flocking towards the exits apace. See you next time we get to Wembley then, then. But others, notably the Blues Voice, slipped into their loyal supporters suits and began to give it full throttle. Indeed, as Roots Hall resounded to our cheers and chants it must have seemed to anyone outside the ground that we were winning the game by a mile.

Instead we were three long leagues behind in a, more than suspect, hurdlers chase. The rank (In every term of the word!) outsiders "Professional Foul" and "Oooee I'm Injured Again" were well ahead in the field but the crowd favourites "Ruddy Determined" and "I Can Play Football You Can't" hadn't given up. A brilliant shot from Mantom that was just as well saved (Their goalkeeper was more than useful) signalling that, push us against the fences as much as you like, we ain't giving up, wasn't just his mood but that of all of our team.

Chrissy made some changes, exchanging Robinson for Cox and Barrett for McLaughlin. Dieng replaced Kightly soon afterwards as well and it was as if our fire had been freshly stoked. Doncaster's pig sty, that had been looking as if it was made out of admittedly rather doubtful bricks, suddenly reverting to straw, as we upped a few gears; once more taking over total control of the game.

Our reward came in the 75th minute as Tom Hooper followed up another fierce strike by Mantom that the goalkeeper could only parry. Even then, even then, those cheating barstewards thought it would be ok to cheat again as one of their players clearly 'saved' the ball with his hands as it flew past their keeper. Referees decision? Only a goal!

Seems strange to complain about a Southend goal but hang on a mo. Their guy had just blatantly handled the ball in an attempt to stop us scoring and the ref's not taking any action! Par for the course given his total disinterest in the game so far, but really?

Still we were back in the game and had but Hopper been a mite steadier in setting his target just two minutes later we would really have been back in the fight. Alas his shot blazed over the bar but, in the 86th minute, a close range strike from Robinson had the Old Lady up on her feet and performing an outrageous Cha Cha in celebration. Could the unbelievable be really about to happen?

With another drinks break having occurred and any number of substitutions taking place it was somewhat of a surprise, given also the time wasting tactics that Rovers had adopted ever since taking the lead, to see only seven extra minutes added on. But nevertheless we spent that time well, the ball rarely leaving Doncaster's half of the pitch and believe it or not, eventually the totally unbelievable did happen!

A rare attack by Doncaster had broken down leaving us with a free run down the wing. Their last defender flew across the pitch to bring our player down with a tackle that even the "All Blacks" would have viewed as being a tad questionable. It was a straight red, No question about it. Only their players was writhing around the pitch as if his waist line that had suddenly been ripped into two pieces rather than his victims.

The ref fumbled around (Nice change that!) and then produced just a yellow card. Unbelievable and you can just imagine how the Thunderbirds nest erupted. We weren't alone in expressing our anger, most of the West Stand on its feet and braying for blood. Ref or player, we really didn't care. Preferably both!!

It's even possible that the East stand might have tossed a cockle or two into the air too. What was in no doubt though was that their manager fully approved of his players despicable action. There again he had the audacity to claim that his side had ruled the second half! But, thinking about it, he was right. The ref having did give total control of the rule book over to them!

A few minutes later the game ended. It had been one of football in the first half, rugby in the second and now it was turning into a prize fight as players from both sides squared up to each other. Symbolic of the whole sad affair, seconds before, Lennon had clearly been elbowed in the face only for the linesman, (Why should the ref have all the fun), to somehow adjudge that he had committed the foul. The matter was now being resolved by a kangaroo court with biased judges on all sides. It was a farce that fully summed up the games result!

So, a defeat upon the opening day of the season. Ordinarily it would have left many down in the dumps but such had been our determination to get back into the game, and so despicable had been Rovers tactics and as for the ref Accordingly there was more of a mood of optimism as people left the ground. Yes we had been beaten, but not by a better team. Not by a side that played better football but instead by one that had shamed their mothers with their underhanded approach to the game.

No doubt we will encounter similar opponents over the long journey ahead. Just hopefully not too often. More concerning though was the attitude of the referee who seemed totally prepared to let Rovers do whatever they wanted. We've had some real cuckoos over the years and the F.A or whoever, seem content to just let them do their thing. One, Ward, has even been promoted to the Premiership. Whilst they fully deserve each other, it does rather leave one wondering just how bad an official has to be before the authorities take action. Many of Wards decisions left you speechless, but still he has arisen through the ranks. Something smells in league H.Q and it isn't just Doncaster Rovers tactics!

This report unfortunately has to end on a very sad note.

During the summer Mrs A, Sheila, passed away after a short illness. Behind her she left a devastated Uncle Albert and three daughters alongside a number of grandchildren.

Although she never actually partook in a Thunderbird adventure, Sheila was always aboard Thunderbird II. If Albert wasn't already explaining one of our 'detours' to her over the phone, he was loudly planning what he was going to say to her just as soon as he got home. "She is never going to believe this" being one of his favourite phrases.

Equally at home games, during halftime Albert would disappear towards the back of the stand just to give her an update upon how the game was going. Always returning with a rueful shake of his head at how calmly she had dealt with his news, good or bad.

His family's massive loss has left an unfillable hole inside the world of the Thunderbirds too. Her place being one that was uniquely special to her. Each and every one of us will remember Sheila with great fondness. And so, in the future on one those very rare occasions when TBII does lead us up a blind alley, inside all of our heads will be a little picture of the smile that always appeared whenever she heard such 'unexpected' tidings.

Sleep well Mrs A.

Come on you Blues!!