



Saturday 11th August 2018



Plymouth 1 - Southend 1



Sunrise over Pitsea marshes. A sight to rival the Serengeti, the Taj Mahal and quite possibly the glint in Rodney's eye whenever he spots an unclaimed 5 pence piece on the floor. But was it being appreciated? Not given the black looks that were being directed at the innocent pilot of Thunderbird II as he guided his magnificent craft into a landing. Yes, it was earlyish in the morning, and yes, it was regrettable that the C2C timetable did not match the Thunderbird's flight schedule to the second. But hey, any morning that had a Southend Utd fixture as its headline, had to be worth waking up early for. Doesn't it?

With more grumbling noises than a flatulent elephant's stomach, Denzil and Micky Pearce stowed away their gear. Essential supplies for the pilot (Chocolate bars from the mainland) on one hand, enough brochures (courtesy of Miss Selfridge and the Body Shop) to cover the results of said elephants embarrassment, on the other. They then, stern faced and silent, plonked themselves down inside TBII's spacious and luxurious passenger compartment, before crossing their arms and staring blank faced out of the window. Mike could only put it down to shell shock.

In Denzil's case it was a combination of having to be conscious before noon and witnessing daylight in the raw flesh. After months spent sitting in the dark watching one Hollywood production after another, encountering a world outside of a cinema had clearly taken its toll. However, in Micky Pearce's case, Mike could be more understanding. Foregoing a breakfast that would have featured, bacon, eggs, hash browns and beautifully prepared mushrooms was more than enough to get anyone off to a slow start. Perhaps though he could have asked his hotel for a doggy bag? Possibly two?

The short hop over to the valley in which resides the world renowned Tracy Island International airport was therefore not one that even a fussy librarian would have considered to be noisy. Although the short yelp of pain that Denzil expressed as he realised that the paper shops weren't yet open, meaning that he would have to forego his usual perusal of a photo of a women who had clearly had to get dressed in a hurry and so forgotten some essential items, did break the silence at one point.

As per usual, the door granting access to the passenger terminal was stuck. A tall form, clad in an away shirt and jeans whose length was measured in yards rather than inches, could though be observed tightly holding onto the handle on the other side. Boycie was clearly determined to deny all access to his fortress and even though Denzil was hopping up and down on one foot, pleading to be allowed to perform his usual devotions, the door was slow to open.

Eventually though it did and, even before the islands security force could react, the sound of waking birds and other inhabitants of the nearby hedgerow was joined by the gentle sound of Denzil's worshipful religious ceremony. Micky Pearce meanwhile was trying on his new away shirt. Now, three of the four travelling supporters would be wearing the new look whilst the fourth, a member of the church according to St Rodney? was bearing colours that were so like yesterday. Apparently, hand lotions don't come cheap and thus certain sacrifices had had to be made!

Empty, bright blue, skies greeted TBII as she rose in the air, her elegant nose pointed due West. Hardly a zephyr of a breeze disturbing her wake as the monstrosity called the QE II bridge began to appear upon the

horizon. Just why its architect was allowed to build the damn thing so high is a total mystery. But there it stands, its three, almost vertical, lanes linking the land of the free with a swamp whose resident lifeforms can't even agree if they are 'Men of Kent' or 'Kentish Men'. The film "A Bridge to far" was definitely set in the wrong location!

Fortunately soon it was just a blot on the landscape as we flew onwards in good conditions towards our destination. After last season's debacle upon a road jokingly called a motorway it had been decided to forego the doubtful attractions of the M4 and instead, taking in Stonehenge along the way, journey along the A303. But before venturing a step upon the ancient road to the West, the demands of a passenger compartment that was by now, unfortunately awake, had to be acceded to. And so a stop at Fleet services was duly made.

It would seem that every motorway service area in the country is undergoing refurbishment and Fleet was no exception. So although Mike moored up in his customary close distance to the services entrance, a long walk around a builder's yard still ensued before anything resembling a breakfast tray could be espied.

One of the species was duly captured by Micky Pearce whose conversational input for some time was naturally limited. Boycie sunk his teeth into something that Marlene had prepared earlier (Brave man. Especially as she was foregoing the trip due to having to keep an eye on the islands security force. Her lengthy discourse upon the subject, fully expressing her displeasure, being left to the readers imagination!) Denzil though wanted food for his eyes rather than his stomach, and so soon reappeared happily clutching copies of those papers/magazines that catered to his taste. Mike, his behaviour totally becoming that of a pilot, just indulged in a light offering of fruit. Ok, so they were, to be more precise, fruit flavoured sweets, but, don't the doctors advise at least five of them a day?

Apart from a slight delay at Stonehenge itself and then again at Exeter our journey was relaxed and uninterrupted. But, as the far, far west began to come into view, so did vast herds of dark clouds. Each one eager to have its flooded udders 'milked'. Their parlour of choice proving to be the landscape within which we were travelling. Sheets of water pouring down, drenching everything in sight. Even Noah would have been impressed!

The downpour was so prolonged and violent that fears that the game, now just 30 or so miles away, might be postponed began to be aired. Grandad's report, (He had flown ahead of us acting as scout), that he had required a lifebelt whilst seeking out a programme seller, hardly lightening our collective mood. Accordingly, whilst the sight of any set of floodlights gets the heart to beat just that little bit faster, our first glimpse of 'Home Park', Plymouths ground, was through the curtain of a waterfall, so incessant was the downpour.

This did not please Boycie. Always one eager to support Eeyore's view of the world, his expression as he donned wet protection over his already soaked through clothing, spoke volumes, and we're not talking early editions of 'Alice in Wonderland' here. Indeed, conditions were so bad that Denzil, who had been planning his shopping excursion in great and loving detail throughout the journey out, had to revise his plans; shortening his long shopping list to just one entry; that of a match day programme. The futures market in scented soap collapsing as a direct result!

Plymouth is a town, ok city, built upon a number of hills. Rome might well have more famous ones, but the moles whose activities resulted in so many slopes and dips could still take a certain pride in their work. Accordingly, the pavements were so uneven, that, when an incoming tide of water wasn't heading for your shoes, an ebbing one was eyeing up your heels with inconsiderable interest.

Lots and lots of sloshing noises and unrepeatable language therefore were a feature of our wade from where TBII was moored (Some sort of wooden boat with lots of animals aboard was in the bay to our right) to the ground. For some reason, sheer bloody mindlessness some might suggest, the away supporters turnstiles were situated as far away from the entrance to the ground as possible. Unsurprisingly then, we were all well and truly drenched long before it came into sight. Cue more words with lots of **@@### in them!

Once inside though we were in the dry. Some, notably Mike, addressed this issue straight away by purchasing a coffee. His outsides might well have just been given a thorough wash but his throat was doing a fair impression of that of a camel that hadn't seen even a mirage of an oasis for several days. Unfortunately it was volcanically hot and thus he had to wait quite some time (The board for added time in the first half had been waved) before he could quench his thirst. His companions though were just relieved to be back on dry land!

Those Thunderbirds who had attended preseason games (The 'ardkore') were by now able to recognise the new faces in our team quite easily. Denzil though was still having to use programme notes as an aide memoire. Therefore whilst for some, it was a simple task to spot our new season long loanee, striker Shawn McCoulsky, it took others a mite longer (Think eons) to catch on. McCoulsky would be warming the bench today but injuries (Lennon, broken toe, Hyam, cause unknown) had opened the door for John White and Timothee Dieng to kick off their seasons.

Argyles supporters have a deserved reputation for getting behind their team and thus, as the two respective teams warmed up (Code for 'got soaked in the still falling rain') Mike and Boycie expressed their shared view that we were in for a tonking. The Plymouth players looked more focused than ours and, whilst it was encouraging to see us actually practising attacking formations, it nevertheless did little to guard against the growing feeling of dread that was growing within both of us.

Meanwhile Mick Pearce was unsuccessfully trying to find somewhere that both he, and a steward, could agree upon for him to tie up his "German Shrimper" flag. Where one thought would be ok, the other one didn't. In the end he almost gave up, before, just before kick-off, settling for a spot close to another Southend flag. The TV cameras might not catch it, but at least it would remain dry.

Indeed, the heavenly tap (Boycie called it something else!) was beginning to be turned off and so the game commenced, with Blues (Light) playing towards us, in relatively dry condition. Equally it quickly became evident that our fears of being turned over were totally unfounded as instead it was us who took over almost total control of the game. Indeed, but for a totally biased lineman we would have taken the lead in the fifth minute as Hopper pounced upon a loose ball following a save by their goalkeeper to score. Alas, the cretin, who only awarded us one throw in all game through (Slight exaggeration but you get the picture) decided that Hopper was offside. Just how?

Given that he was well on onside when the initial shot was made and had had to move forward several feet in order to meet the ball, there was absolutely no way that he was ever in an offside position. But 'Respect' has to be paid to the officials, even when they are biased, blind and stupid. So, the decision stood. We were not impressed.

Accordingly imagine our reaction soon afterwards when another Blues attack was only thwarted by Hopper (I think) being harpooned to the ground, inside the area, and right under the Nelson impressionists eye. With Blues playing well and totally inept officials certain T'Birds were beginning to experience a fantastic day out!!

Traffic, as they say, was only in one direction, and it was we who were bombarding their goal. Not sure of the day's final tally but it was something like 17 attempts by us to their four or five. Statistics that obviously give rise to doubts about our goal scoring to chance ratios. But, just as against Doncaster last week, we were up against a decent (Fortunate?) goalkeeper and so whilst it's true that some of our finishing could have been a tad more clinical, whenever it was, so we had him to beat. Very frustrating!

The game becoming even more so when a totally delirious and overexcited linesman up the other end of the field, having seen one of their players trip over his own feet, signalled a penalty. Not a home player or supporter had made such a claim. Neither had the ref, mere feet away from the incident observed anything untoward. But in the totally demented head of an assistant official who so far had had nothing to do other than dream dark thoughts, it was a pen!

We of course protested but to no avail. Up against the brotherhood of denial we could argue until we were blue in the face and it would make no difference. An idiot had made a call, and even though the referee disagreed, a sacred pact existed between them and so it had to be adhered to. Plymouth, who until now had played a role in the game even less than that of a Star Fleet officer in a red uniform about to be beamed down to a planet's surface alongside Captain Kirk, taking the lead. Amused we were not!

In the past such incidents have derailed us, promising starts to games diminishing away quickly to nothingness. But not with this team! Not with a set of players whose mind set was clearly 'Sod the officials; let's get on with our game'. So, whilst it was true that for a very few moments a buoyant home team picked up its pace (They even strung three passes together!) It wasn't overly long before we were back knocking upon the edge of their penalty area again.

Later, after the game, there was a silence to rival that of the Pitsea marshes incident, when Boycie raised the question of who was our 'Man of the Match'. It was a very tough call. Whilst no one had stood head and shoulders above anybody else, when subjected to the microscope, each and every one of our players had had a good game. So perhaps the simple and obvious answer was just 'Blues'!

Selecting our 'Baddie of the Day, (Official's aside) was much simpler. Their number 9 (Taylor) had but one tactic. If he 'won' the ball, then all well and good in his world. If not, then 'Hit the ground and cry for mummy' became his only response. It was both irritating and ridiculous. If only because, despite us gently alerting the referee to this sad, little performance, little, if any, note was taken of it.

However we did eventually get awarded our well overdue award when a penalty was given in our favour by the ref (Note, not the 'Its offside' linesman who had just as clear a view but was clearly not interested). He had spotted one of our players being dragged to the ground as a corner came over and so, rightly this time, pointed to the spot.

Demetriou immediately grabbed the ball and, even though Cox asked if he was sure, no one else was going to take the kick. No one else was going to score our first penalty of the new season either. And so, to fantastic and delighted cheering from the away crowd behind the goal, Blues drew level in a game that they were already totally bossing.

Sullenly, Plymouth restarted the game and almost immediately the assassin minded Taylor was at it again. Only this time he was adding armed robbery to his crime sheet as he thrust almost the entire length of his arm into Demetriou's face. Instant bedlam!!

Our bench, right in front of the incident, went totally ape and our players, led by an enraged Turner surrounded the ref. Taylor meanwhile simply walked away as if nothing at all had occurred, leaving the ref, who was so out of his depth that all the fish had shiny lights, with not a clue as to what to do.

To his rescue came their manager who, taking one for his team drew attention away from the guilty Taylor by shouting shocking abuse at Demetriou such that Chrissy felt that he had to intervene. Now, with the support of his 4th official, the hapless ref began to regain some of his bottle; issuing red cards to both managers. A farcical decision that was only matched by Taylor's receipt of just a yellow card. It did though go rather well with the broad streak running down the back of the referee's shirt!

Halftime occurred soon afterwards and, rather surprisingly, both teams left the pitch quietly leaving behind them a set of officials who were so bemused that they required a group of stewards to show them the way back to their cage. With luck (We had all our fingers crossed) they wouldn't later be able to find their way back. Alas, Plymouth, emerging from the tunnel some minutes after we had reappeared gave them just enough of a clue.

The second period was pretty much a reflection of the first. Plymouth, despite having made three substitutions early into it, rarely getting a chance to get out of their own half. Their subs did provide an

element of more energy into their game but little more accuracy or purpose. We, in direct contrast, looked sharp and keen to maintain our almost total control over the game.

But, as time ticked on, we began to lose our way a little. Tired legs, minds? Don't know, but changes nevertheless occurred as we too brought on subs. Not overly sure who made the decisions. Could Chrissy, seated high up and alone in an otherwise deserted stand (It was being demolished to be replaced by a new one) have been making the calls despite being red carded? Or was it one, both? of our assistant managers who was responsible. If so, were they following their own inclinations, or Chrissy's instructions?

Lots of questions but few answers, save that our substitutions appeared to be more defensive minded than attack. Were we therefore, with just 15 minutes or so of the game to go, content to settle for just a point? Disappointed if that was the case because this was a game that, just as in the early stages of the Doncaster match, was ours for the taking. Plymouth having been reduced to playing little more than bit parts in a movie whose script we were writing.

Both teams though did create chances to claim all three points as the game entered extra time. Ex-Blue (Yeah we all know what that means) Ladapo did have a shot but, it went well wide of the near post. Whilst Robinson, clean through on goal, was disappointed to witness his shot hitting the wrong side of the net. A chance that caused many of us, away up at the far end of the pitch, into momentary orbit as the net shook. Disappointment accompanying our descent as we realised that the ball wasn't actually inside it as we all had so dearly hoped.

A draw then. Certainly a result we would have taken as we swam towards the ground, but now, doggy paddling our way back to TBII, it was tinged with more than a tad of disappointment. No way was Hoppers' goal offside, but equally, surely three points should still have been ours given the way that we had totally bossed the game.

Those extra points will come though. Our play, short of actually scoring, is very good and, it has to be said, our shooting has definitely improved since last term. Crosses though could benefit from being worked upon a little more. Too many times the ball failed to clear the first man.

Steady improvement then hopefully will be the name of the game and, surely, we can't be fated to come across so many fortunate goal keepers in the future. They of course will claim otherwise, but when outstretched limbs, heading away from the ball, somehow still get into its way, that's not doing a job, that's pure luck!

On the journey back we ran into the East Thurrock team who had lost 2 – 0 at Torquay. It was interesting to chat to them and get a players view at this stage of the season. Uniformly, whilst disappointed at their result, they felt that it was still very early days in a long season. Therefore, whilst they had no reason to celebrate, long faces were not the order of the day either.

Certainly then, looking at just this one game, despite it only being a draw, we have far more to look forward to than the home supporters. One swallow does not a summer make, though. But, taken together with the first half against Doncaster, it seems that Chrissy Powell is well on the way towards building something special here. So whilst the six points that we could have had do dangle rather tantalisingly in front of us, at least now, we do have one in the bank to start building upon.

Come on you Blues!!