



Saturday 13th October 2018



Gillingham 0 - Southend 2



As the crow flies, the shanty town on the banks of a mudslide was just a few miles away and according to the A.A, it was only 15 by road. So why did Thunderbird II's flight computer record closer to 30?

Now before anyone starts pointing any fingers in Denzil's direction, it must be said that for once he was totally innocent. Well as far as navigational errors go anyway. If you bring in time keeping, religious ceremonies and his desperate attempts to obtain a copy of his favourite comic ... well then his crime sheet is much grimmer, and he is guilty of all charges! But, as far as being the reason for us having to travel almost twice the usual distance his conscience was clear.

Neither was it the back seat unions fault. Although, had Mike followed their advice, we would have arrived much later and a mooring post would not have been to be had! In fact, it was only due to Mike, having carefully considering all his options, heading directly North from Tracy Island International rather than South that we arrived just in time to secure one of the three remaining posts!

Which is all very interesting but it still doesn't explain why a flight path that should have simply read as A13, M25, god awful bridge, the mud bank from hell, A2 and finally dump, also involved both the A30 and A12! It just didn't make any sense. Unless of course you listened to the traffic reports!

Thanks to some road works, the A13 was closed. Well at least in the direction that we needed to take. Being only one of two escape routes from the Essex Rivera, this meant that traffic was all concentrated upon the A127. A situation that meant that it, in turn, had become a carpark! Gluegoo estimating delays of up to an hour upon either route. Given that the sun had already passed its zenith as TBII powered it way up into the skies, this was not very encouraging news. 'Smoke me a kipper' had a problem to solve, and fast!

Cometh the moment, cometh the man and thus, whilst Denzil happily chortled his way through Deidre, Albert remembered the war and the Greens indulged themselves in a spot of backseat housekeeping, Mike, an oasis of calm inside a storm, thought about boxes and what the world was like was outside them.

His decision, unannounced to his misbehaving cargo, led to quite some cries of dismay as signs for Chelmsford and Ipswich began decorating the roadside. To describe the scene as revolting, whilst being absolutely true in one sense, would be to exaggerate. But many and varied certainly were the ejaculations of a passenger compartment that was suddenly full of expert navigators. Actually that is an exaggeration! But as they could all read what Gocall was telling them they weren't being at all reticent in relaying it forwards!

However, as the miles smoothly sped by and an ugly hump started appearing in the distance, so they began to relax. This encouraged Albert to start rambling on about how he could have become an M.P, possibly even Prime Minister, if he had only carried on going to some meetings. As they all doubtlessly involved copious amounts of beer (Skittles apparently were optional) one had to wonder about his actual level of commitment to his party of choice. There were no doubts though whatsoever about their relief when he suddenly stopped appearing at their door!

Meanwhile, Denzil, still pictures rather than moving, having captured his attention was almost in a day dream as he crunched his way through some vegetarian crisps that smelt like a herd of sheep suffering from flatulence. Savouring the pastoral aroma to the full though were the Greens. It brought back fond memories of their last salad, some twenty minutes or so now in the past, and they began eagerly looking forward to their next.

Mike, wishing for one of those things that taxi drivers have to cut themselves off from their passengers, grimly started to climb in preparation for the obstacle ahead. Built out of balsa wood and string, it stretched from civilisation, over a tidal stream, to a wilderness. A place whose only saving grace was that it at least provided a barrier between the promised land and the dark fells where doughnuts were only occasionally in season!

Our season though was showing encouraging signs of turning around. However, at a ground where referees hate us and with an ever lengthening line of players all armed with sick notes, Chrissy would have quite a challenge finding eleven men for this fixture. White, Hopper, Demitriou, Smith, Lennon, Hyam, Bunn, Barratt, the unavailable players were almost a team in themselves. Climbing the table we most certainly were but our ascent could quickly come to an abrupt halt were more injuries to be incurred today. Eyes therefore turned towards the officials whose responsibility it was to protect the players. Would they be up to the job?

The last time that we had encountered this ref was down in Plymouth. That game had ended with a number of bookings and both manager being sent off. Mike however had noticed that although he had shown signs of excitement at times, overall the ref had remained calm throughout the game. He therefore decided to take a vow of silence with regard to the officials' performance today, no matter how badly they performed!

Now, given how Mike had left this ground on countless occasions with absolutely no voice left and full of fury at the ineptness of the officials, it can be appreciated just how incredulously the Thunderbirds received this news. Not one of them believing that he would even last five minutes before exploding!

Bright sunshine, accompanied by a gale force North Easterly, welcomed us as we climbed the rickety stairs that provide access to the upper layers of scaffolding that Gillingham somehow get away with calling the away end. Suspended in the air, miles above the ground, upon a structure held together by just a few rusty screws and nuts, 'secure' was not a word appearing in anyone's vocabulary. You could feel it shaking in the wind, as indeed so too were the floodlight pylons. A veritable earthquake zone, it was to be our home for the next two hours or so. Would we survive!

Out came the teams and the game began with the home side kicking towards us; the gale force, but thankfully warm, wind at their backs. It gave them a tremendous advantage because they only had to lightly tap the ball for it to fly forwards whilst we could hit it as hard as we liked only to witness it stopping in mid-air before coming right back at us. We were playing boomerang football to their ballet like steps. Accordingly it very quickly became a game of attack against defence and guess which team had a finger in the dyke!

It was leaking all over the place. Not through our lack of desire or endeavour but simply down to the laws of nature. Somewhere to the far South West of us was some sort of hurricane and its fallout was proving to have a very negative effect upon us. Even Oxley, whose drop kicks have been known to fly over the opposition's goal, was struggling to clear his area, so fierce was the wind. Accordingly, we sitting in a stand that trembled in even a breeze and so now was dancing the hokey cokey were treated to a seemingly endless stream of home corners, free kicks and goal attempts. Edifying it was not!

Granting a team a few corners was one thing, to allow them to practice them again and again was quite another. Surely they would soon get one right! But they too were having problems coming to terms with the conditions and so balls flew continuously over a packed area to relative safety. It would be nice to report that they were then not only cleared, but also served to initiate an away attack that had the home fans trembling almost as much as us, dangling as we were amongst pipes and rails that were shaking so much that, had they been Elvis, they surely would have been banned. Alas though, if the wind didn't decide to just pat the ball straight back, it indulged itself in a game of 'Bend it like Beckham', sending the ball off in any direction. Still,

halftime was hesitantly approaching. If we could just somehow hold out until then, then we would have the advantage in the second half. If we could hold out!

Somebody who most definitely was holding out was Mike who, true to his word, apart from one anguished cry of 'Hello' and another of 'Offside', had not admonished the officials at all. However, in all truth, they had had very little of consequence to do and so Mike's impression of the Monks of Zen was hardly a hard role to maintain. Nevertheless it still impressed his fellow T'Birds.

Given the dire records of officials involved in this particular fixture it was truly amazing to see a ref who, although making the odd error, was generally taking a neutral, controlled view of the game. Possibly the conditions mitigated against Gillingham's usual mischief (Their number 9 should have been booked on at least three occasions for diving in the area though!) or perhaps the catering firm that usually provided them with steak pies had gone bust. Whatever, their usual aggressive stance was absent and in its place were just hoofs.

Whilst we at least attempted to play the ball at ground level, they scorned such feeble gestures. Instead they just concentrated upon skying the ball in the general direction of their forwards; leaving it up to them to do all the chasing. Just as long as we maintained our discipline and shape, such tactics were never going to cause us a problem. So, although there was an occasional home header or shot even Trigger, his hands full of cake and porkpies as usual, would still have had time to carefully pack them away in his hamper before then making an easy save.

Even so, there was a general cry of relief when the break arrived with the score line still 0 – 0. Yes, the fact that we could now pay a brief visit to terra firma rather than sit in terror constant was a factor. But equally, almost everyone felt that, having held them at bay, it would now be our turn to do all the attacking!

Only the wind, not a problem of course to the likes of Grandad and Denzil, but certainly a factor of concern to Mike whose silver, wolf like, locks had been flowing almost straight back of his head was becoming fitful. Now, instead of trying to shake our stand to the ground, it was craftily reserving its strength until it could suddenly gust from an unexpected direction. With our luck it was probably going to go into full reverse!

Indeed it, at first, seemed that it had as Gillingham started off the second just as they had the first by attacking us, seemingly at ease. But gradually we began to find our feet and launch a few attacks of our own. A nice ball by Yearwood then found Cox on the edge of the area. However he was surrounded by defenders and had nowhere really to go except across the box. A route that he opted to take, wiggling his way past challenge after challenge before finally guiding the ball into the back of the net to send the away stand absolutely crazy.

We had been singing our hearts out for ages but the wind had just been throwing it straight back at us so it was doubtful that our chants of support could be heard much beyond the six yard box. But now they most certainly could as, with the team celebrating madly in front of us, a roar of sheer joy and excitement, more than equal to anything any ruddy hurricane could throw at us, erupted out from our stand. If it fell down to the ground, as it had been threatening to do so for quite some time, then it was now going to be our own dumb fault as we danced and jumped around in glee at a Southend goal.

If those scenes were manic then just think how it must have looked to the downhearted home supporters when Coxie did it again just two minutes later. Yearwood had gained the ball in his own half before commencing upon a run that carried him straight into the heart of the Gillingham defence. Then, at the very last minute he slipped a simple pass through to Cox who made no mistake from twelve yards even if it was at an angle!

Mars to the left of us, Jupiter to our right, Saturn there, right in front of us ... our journey through the heavens was a bright and starry one. No bronze tubes loaded with lead awaited us either, just the sight of our boys performing a war dance. Gillingham's rust and string stand must be stronger than it looks because how it withstood the tempest of delight that was now the Southend support is otherwise unknown. If we

weren't going up, we were going down and so the grating below our feet was taking a real thumping. But did we care? What do you think?

To their credit Gillingham tried to raise their game; the ball now flying above the stands rather than just level with their roofs, but to no avail. Yes shots did rain in alongside the odd header but none were ever a real threat although Turner did do well to block the ball after it had eluded Oxley on one occasion. So, huff and puff as the home team most certainly did, our defence held firm and three points were our, very due, reward!

It felt very strange indeed leaving the Priestfield Stadium not swearing and blinding about the officials. In fact everything had an air of unreality about it. That is until the traffic reports began arriving. The A13 was now blocked in both directions so just how we were going to deliver Deniz back to his station was a mystery.

Once more though Mike rose to the challenge and, although it involved much darting through back roads, eventually TII was able to lower her wheels and so land upon the station tarmac. It brought to an end a rather interesting day that had involved many a detour. But we did not begrudge any one of those extra miles because at the end of our journey we not only had more three points but finally we had won at the stadium of utter despair!

Come on you Blues!!