



Saturday 26th October 2018



Sunderland 3 - Southend 0



Supporters often expect players to run through brick walls for them. But watching Denzil attempting to conquer his own personal Everest didn't quite have the same air about it! For one thing he was walking and not running. For another the wall in question was quite a few bricks short of a building, being little more than waist height. But still a brave? bold?, definitely misguided, attempt was being made to scale it in a single stride. And failing miserably ...

Whilst Denzil desperately looked around for a Sherpa to aid in him in his ambitions, his fellow Thunderbirds, observing events with both amusement and quite a degree of puzzlement, "Why was he attempting to scale the wall when a perfectly acceptable path was clearly available just a few feet to his left?" from the warmth and comparative safety of TBII, eagerly awaited Phase II of Operation Body Shop.

After a long, but smooth flight, up the A1 we had arrived in Sunderland shortly after noon. On the way up we had passed through scattered rain storms and also spotted the first snows of the season high up on the Pennines. Pre-warned by the weather ladies of such possibilities, a mountain of winter survival gear had filled Thunderbird II's commodious hold. Now Denzil was modelling some of it as he wondered just what to do next.

His dilemma was rather obvious. When he had first attempted to mount the 'wall', few other people had been in sight. But now, us being upon a university canvas and all that, a few curious students were beginning to appear. Amongst their number of course were those of the female variety. Proud of being considered a 'yoof', a somewhat questionable by-product of a long abandoned course in maffs, our bruised, but still undaunted hero, was obviously now somewhat hesitant to be seen to fail again so spectacularly by so many young, attractive, eyelashes. Unable to suppress our laughter, we watched on with considerable glee as, man bag causally arranged around his hip, he tried to man up.

Sensing his situation, a student, her own shoulders visibly shaking, tentatively approached the strange person who was now attempting to perform Clint Eastwood impressions. Her dad had been a fan of films such as Dirty Harry so, familiar with the character, if not quite the way that it was being portrayed in front of her, she attempted to open communications. Unfortunately though the line in question was busy.

Clearly embarrassed by his predicament, Denzil was trying to pass off the situation by pretending to now be interested in some nearby fauna. The game though was unquestionable up and, the young ladies determined attempts to be of assistance to this clearly confused and much older person eventually resulted in a pair of feet shuffling a few paces to the left.

From where we were watching, Denzil then appeared to start shrinking. However later investigation proved that he had in fact been descending a set of steps that took him down to street level. Whatever, his disappearance from view invoked much comment and not a small amount of further laughter. Still his shopping adventure, after a rather invidious start, was now underway leaving us to consider just how we were going to make the mile or so journey to the ground that we could just see peeping above the roofs and chimneys of the surrounding shops and buildings.

Outside the portholes we could see that it was trying to rain again. Equally the Thunderbirds temperature dials were indicating that brass monkey owners might have to be looking towards their laurels very soon. The sight of trees bending in, what was obviously a bitterly cold wind did little to encourage outside pursuits either. Still, nothing ventured ...

To get to the ground we had to pass through a small shopping area, no sign of Denzil, but there again it was not quite the sort of district to encourage Miss Selfridges to open for trade either. Next we had to cross the River Weir via a rather substantial iron bridge. At this point in its travel the river is tidal and indeed the North Sea, uninviting and looking very rough, could just be spotted in the distance. The freezing wind didn't encourage any sightseeing though so, huddled up against the elements we quickly crossed over to the other bank where a small station awaiting our arrival. It had links to Newcastle airport so, if only we had known, we could have landed TBII there and Denzil would have had an excuse not to go wall climbing!

Sunderland were expecting a crowd in excess of 30,000. Accordingly the street surrounding the Stadium of Light were packed with catering vans; all offering burgers, sausages and slices of turkey in curry or gravy depending upon your choice. Mike wanted to loiter but with Grandad keen to buy a programme, and Boycie striding off into the distance at a rate of knots, he, and his empty stomach, had to pass on by.

The stadium, being ex Premiership/Championship, was impressive. Less so was where we were seated ... right up in the gods. The only way that they could have got us further from the pitch would have been to sit us on the roof! We had got up before dawn to get here and now we had a view that required binoculars. Clearly our reputation as travelling supporters who really do support their team had put the fear of god into our hosts and they wanted us as far away from the action as possible. Pity then that we can't reciprocate and so position their supporters at the end of the pier when they come to visit us; Ron badly needing the cash that a full North Bank would bring. But still, sticking us up so high and far was going to the extreme especially as, in a 49,000 seater ground, there were plenty of other areas, closer to the pitch, that we could have been positioned. Nice one T'lads!!

Our players, hands held to their brows as they searched for where all the singing was coming from, eventually located us. But it was clear that each and every one of the 1,100+ who had made the trip would need to be in fine voice if the team were to benefit at all from our support. We were up for it though; the big question was, were they?

At Shrewsbury and Luton they hadn't been. Today, in front of a massive crowd in League 1 terms, would we freeze or instead turn on the heat? Without injured players like Hooper, we looked lightweight up front and our bench, unlike Denzil, could legitimately claim to get fed for free in pubs if accompanied by at least one adult. Alberts receives ('Attracts' really doesn't work!) the same sort of offers, but only if he agrees to a takeaway!

The difference in the size of both team squads was also quite apparent. Whilst we had fifteen or so warming up, they had more than thirty blokes kicking balls about. No injury problems for them. But there again, our bank manager wasn't rubbing his hands at the sight of a multimillion sized parachute. Instead he was probably wondering what to do with a rather battered and tired, ten for a fiver, hanky! Nothing like a level playing field when it comes to football!

We started the game very tentatively. The occasion, and crowd, seemingly too big for us. But, after five minutes or so we began to exert a bit of authority over the game. The 'Roker' roar, of which we had heard absolutely nothing so far, falling even quieter. It had been one of the two battles that we had been richly anticipating. One on the pitch, one on the terraces. But, whilst we were well and truly making ourselves heard, not a peep or murmur was coming from the home supporters. There were over 30,000 people inside the ground but the only ones making any noise were those from Essex. The North East of England is supposed, especially by the fatuous TV talking heads, to be a hot bed of football. Not on this evidence. Even our enquiries regarding whether or not the ground was a library were unanswered. Perhaps it was all because it was our team who were doing all the talking on the pitch!

After a confident start, our hosts were now well and truly back in their kennel. Blues attacking them apparently at will and from every direction. Well at least until the two goal posts came into sight that is because, once the frown upon the goalkeepers face could be seen, so our game came to a full, and rather abrupt, stop. We really are a jigsaw side. Once in the box, we simply fall to pieces!

Sunderland, the team and their supporters alike, could not believe their luck as we scorned chance after chance to take the lead. If a forward didn't hesitate to shoot, then a final pass would become just that. Crosses quickly became noughts and whilst headers were being well directed; from the edge of the penalty area no goalkeeper in the world was ever going to be troubled.

Then disaster struck as Coker, challenging for the ball, went down. His cries of agony clearly echoing all around the stadium. And, for the second time in two matches, one of our key players was being carried off the field aboard a stretcher. We could not believe it. Our squad is hardly the biggest in the league and to lose three first team players within the space of five days is a body blow that few teams, possibly even our hosts, could just simply brush aside. So, forget any hopes of promotion, pure survival must surely be our aim from now on in!

Inevitably then, soon afterwards, on a rare breakaway attack, they took the lead. It was well against the run of play but a ball in the back of the net still counts, no matter how it got there. And, suddenly, for all of a micro second, the ground woke up and there was cheer. But it didn't last for long and was very soon forgotten as our chants of support once more took over. We might well be losing the fight on the pitch, and even then only because of some very biased judging! However, as far as the war of the terraces was concerned, we were breezing it!

A subtle hint that the referring might not have been all that it should have been might have there have been picked up by an astute reader. For the opening thirty or so minutes, the ref had been, well a ref. Making a mistake from time to time but also, on enough occasions, getting it right. But when Dru got brought down in the area, he just totally bottled it!

It happened right in front of us and there was absolutely no way that their defender touched the ball. Yet there was the ref waving play on. His assessor's attitude no doubt being just as casual as he awarded him full marks for not caving in to our cries for a penalty. The officials from five or so seasons ago might well have retired. But they are still hanging around to haunt us. Only this time as referee assessors. Small wonder then that the game is suffering from a surfeit of total cretins!

An equaliser just before halftime would have set us up nicely for the second period. And, had the incident occurred at the other the end of the pitch then there is little doubt in anybody's minds, home or away supporters, that the kick would have been awarded. But small minded men have a nasty habit of reflecting both their attitude and abilities at such times and, given that their masters choose not to act; will continue to do so ad ruddy nauseum.

Those of you who have ever played Subbuteo will know exactly what sort of view we were having of the game. Place your smallest finger in direct eyesight, and half the players disappeared. Wet Spam supporters might enjoy such an experience (There again, probably the only way that you can appreciate their team is from a distance. A very long one!), but for those of us more used to seeing their football at first hand, rather than via a telescopic lens, it was frustrating. As so was our continued failure to score!

Sunderland had come out more determined to contain us in the second half. But nevertheless it was we who were playing all the football and doing all the attacking; our hosts barely being able to hang onto our shirttails (They did try too though. Almost as hard as the referee was pretending not to see them so doing!) Dru in particular was aware of their fresh approach; being continually floored by the same individual. So, eventually and after quite some time, the ref did have a chat with him, probably to just check which team was which. Because, soon afterwards, Dru's first foul of the game was immediately awarded by a yellow card. He had been upped, unceremoniously, almost continuously since the restart. Events well witnessed by the ref who

gave us free kicks as a result. Yet, on the very occasion of his first bad tackle, he was the one being booked. Outrageous!

Things became even more outrageous as Sunderland then scored a second and then a third. Credit to them, they had four chance on goal and scored with three of them. We in contrast had dozens but rarely even warmed their keeper's hands. The apparent 'gulf' in difference between the two team being not only in the referees mind, but also in their ability to convert opportunities into points.

That such a difference was in no way reflected by how the game had actually gone, mattering not a wit. Indeed, some home biased reporter gleefully informed the BBC that Sunderland had been 'Too hot' for us to handle. Clear evidence that, like the ref, they were long overdue an appointment at Specsavers! But nevertheless it was still unfortunately a line that was backed up by a result that sent us home feeling rather deflated.

Almost the final word though goes to Chrissy who after the game made these comments.

"All I want is fair judgements and I very rarely complain but I'm just not having what I've seen from the referee,".

"It's a stonewall penalty on Dru Yearwood and the ball hasn't even moved so how can he say the defender won it?"

"Harry Bunn got booked when he got the ball, Dru got booked for one tackle but (Lee) Cattermole has about three".

"He cleans Dru out and it's no booking".

"I know we all make mistakes but I can't have that".

"They're belittling us. Don't belittle Southend and my players, that's scandalous".

"Some of the decisions that went against us, I just can't have that, sorry".

"You understand there are 30,000 fans here but you have to be brave".

"I really don't want to come out and do this but it has to be said".

Of course, we all know what the F.A's likely reaction to such comments is likely to be. Pity then that they won't be so forthright in 'protecting the games image' when it comes to the pitiful performance of their choice of a match official.

Our team had more than ran through brick walls for us. But, when it came to taking on stony faced officials, we sadly lost the contest. A story that is almost as tired as it is old!

Come on You Blues!!