



Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2018



### Southend 1 – Crawley 1



It's raining. Hard! A fierce, gusting, wind is testing every panel of the garden fencing and yet fireworks are still filling the night sky. Turn the thermometer down a few degrees, just enough to allow the weeping skies to cry snow instead of water, and it could be a scene stolen straight off the Titanic's decks. Equally though it could be a rather too accurate take on what has become of our season!

No producer of Casualty, desperate for the script to maintain any sort of credibility, would dare fill the wards with our amount of injured. The new stadium storyline is receiving a pension and as for the prospect of promotion .... well let's just say there's more chance of Rodney giving away copies of his hidden treasure maps!

Faced with the prospect of two cup games within seven days (Does the trophy count as a cup?) and with a team that pretty much picks itself, Chrissy had opted to play a side that pretty much was a carbon copy of the one that kicked off the season. Bar of course the much missed Hopper. Up against a team from a division below us, it still had the look of 'can do' about it but many suspected that, given the extraordinary rules of Walt Disney's favourite mouse's competition, Chrissy was also preparing ground for a team to play on Wednesday that would not incur any fines!

We have not played Crawley for a while but the F.A's black bag had paired us together for this 1st round F.A cup tie. Not the most attractive of opponents. No disrespect intended but the Thunderbirds had been pinning their hopes upon either Forest Rovers away (The thought of all that vegetarian fare making our stomach acids revolt!) or a visit to some smaller non-league outfit. Not that we viewed them as being easy pickings but because it would be an opportunity to travel to pastures new.

But a home tie is never to be scorned and at least it provided us with a chance to kick into touch the long running cup voodoo that has seen us vanish from competitions without ever reaching even the second round. Still, to say that there was a cup atmosphere inside the ground would be to be guilty of exaggerating more than a bit.

Sure the away fans were to be commended; cheering and urging on their side throughout the game despite being a goal behind for a long period. Our supporters response though was rather lack lustre. More resembling an ocean wave that only sporadically rose to the occasion than any cup frenzied support complete with flat caps, toothy grins and noisy wooden rattles. Still, it was the F.A cup and the twin towers, sorry arch, of Wembley was beckoning.

And, for the opening twenty minutes or so, it looked very much like we had it firmly in our sights. Crawley hardly getting a touch of the ball as we swarmed up the pitch creating chance after golden chance. Cox was guilty of not gilt cladding two of them whilst a series of fine saves and grazed posts combined to also keep the scoreboard dormant.

It was a one way street with signs for the second round blazoned across every house. If it had been a boxing match then towels would have covered the pitch. Instead, all we had to show for our endeavours was some bruised bodies (Crawley were more than a tad physical in their attempts to get into the game) and a lot of rued faces as chance after chance went begging.

According to the media chappies we had been looking at a player during the week. Great, many of us thought, a new forward. But instead it was a defender, to be more accurate, a left back. With Coker refusing a new contract and Hendrie the only alternative it made some sort of sense. However Hendrie has been putting in some good performances and although one swallow does not a summer make, surely it is up front that is crying for attention?

This fact being more than highlighted by our continued failure to put the ball away. Its little use us dominating games if the net remains as empty as Trigger's picnic hamper is minutes into any game. Either Mrs T is fattening him up for Christmas or he has worms the size of snakes. The amount of food he tucks away would easily keep a corner shop well stocked for at least a week!

Hopefully though Chrissy has some attack minded targets lined up for the January sales. The rules governing the transfer windows might very well be appropriate for cash rich clubs whose squad sizes match Mike's waist measurements. But for sides like ourselves, they are an anchor around our necks and now we have to somehow find a way of keeping our heads above water until the New Year. By then funds generated by factors such as Leonard's movement between teams will be available (Won't they Ron?). So, fingers crossed, at least two goal hungry players will then be signed. Certainly on this poor showing we badly need them!

Some named Kightly as their 'Man of the Match' after the game. Others though felt that perhaps he had just found his level. Whatever, there was no denying that he had a better game than usual and he even scored a goal. It was quite a good one too, coming as it did in the 9th minute of the game with Kightly seizing upon a fine pass by Cox before guiding the ball wide of a desperate keepers outstretched hands.

Happy Days we all thought as we sat back awaiting the feast that was surely to come. However, Crawley, until then barely poking their heads out of their shells, suddenly decided to make a fist of it (Strangle minded arms, rugby tackles and more handballs than ever are witnessed at a beach volley match also featured) and as a result we began to lose our way.

The sad performance of yet another referee was also something for us to face. Whilst seemingly Crawley could do whatever they wanted without any response from the lanky creature with a whistle (At least two, possibly three, very credible penalty appeals got totally ignored) we were getting penalised at almost every occasion. It's not to suggest that he was an absolute cheat but he certainly bent more rules in Crawley's favour than Uri Geller ever did spoons!

A lot of theories abound about our ragged second half performance but the downright anti Southend attitude of the referee has to be taken into account. It quickly getting to the point that whereas we were being hacked and pulled to the ground almost continually, only they were getting free kicks. So could it have been a case of our players simply taking the view that as we're one up, and there's every risk of getting injured or booked, let's just take things easy? It's certainly a thought!

Chrissy's decision to go play only one up front as the pressure increased has also been questioned. Those with a good take on how formations can effect a game, pointing out that whenever we have adopted this approach, late goals have been scored against us. However, given the lack of forwards at the club, what choice has Chris?

Robinson was having one of his far too often 'away with the fairy' games; totally wasting a fantastic opportunity to puts us two up early in the second half as he opted to blaze over the bar rather than just simply chip the goalkeeper. Which really only left the option of airing McCoulsky if a two pronged attack was to be maintained. But he has looked far too inexperienced to play at this level and so, although numbers can make a difference, wasn't really an option. So, faced with Hobsons choice, Chrissy instead opted to strengthen our midfield.

It was not a popular move with the terrace generals whose murmurs of discontent nearly matched their loudly expressed opinions of the officials. But, hand on hearts, how many players out there would we, having a full squad to pick from, select for this game? Six, possibly seven? So fully accepting that formations do play an important role in the game, surely it's the players, and their abilities, that count for more?

Attitudes too are important and we, alas, get a very poor rating here as well. Anyone can have a good game when things are going well. However it's when things are going badly that a team's real character gets revealed and Dirty Den we ain't. In times past we have had players like Timlin, Clark, Cusack and the unforgettable Roy McDonough; all leaders who used to step up and retake the game by the scruff of its neck in such situations. Look around our team now though, and such personalities are only marked by their total absence. Chrissy, given his post-match comments, is aware of this and again we can only hope that this gets addressed in January.

Cash falls like Leonard's though can only take us so far, the wage bill also has to be considered. So, if fresh faces are to appear, some old ones will need to depart. Brown though left us a legacy and the most likely candidates are all on long term contracts. Chrissy managed to offload one by freezing them out of the team; an approach that he can hardly employ now given our stricken circumstances. His options therefore are more than limited and, therefore, so must be our ambitions.

Much as we all would like to be pushing for promotion or shoving aside sides like today's opponents Crawley, that is not going to happen. Complain, moan and groan as much as we like that is the news. Fake it is not, and face up to it we must. So it was pity that so many of the texts and comments after the game failed to take these factors into consideration. Revealing that many have yet to wake up to these unfortunate facts. But please do, and fast, because your support is going to be vital if we are to maintain our league one status this season. Yes, things are as bad as that, as indeed our second half performance only too clearly showed.

If we had been top dogs in the first half then it was Crawley who were the cats' whiskers in the second. Yes they were aided and abetted by a referee who might as well have put a red shirt on, but still, we should have stood up to the challenge much better. Instead we just wilted, retreating deep into our own half, inviting them to attack. So this they duly did!

They had a big, physical, number 9 who, when he wasn't crying for his mummy or throwing a tantrum, was chucking his weight around. John White was his usual victim and his situation was hardly helped by the one-sided attitude of the referee. Whilst the All Blacks would have stood in awe of some of the tactics employed by the aforementioned bearer of the number nine, White had merely to give some of it back to receive long lectures from a referee's whose eyesight rivalled Mr Magoo's whenever Crawley committed a naughty. White was one player who did stand up to be counted and be counted, his only reward being the threat of dismissal!

Accordingly Oxley began to become involved in the game. Not that he had many saves to make but his box was at times did become quite congested whereas in the first half its only visitors had been bored seagulls. Robinson's ability to get caught offside though was rivalled by Crawley's sulky number 9, and so the linesman's flag often came to our rescue.

It couldn't last though and eventually our visitors got their deserved reward; albeit through an own goal scored by the unfortunate John White. That it arrived just five minutes from time adding further fuel to those who don't support the one man attack approach. The final whistle signalled a very disappointing draw with the replay being in just over a week's time. By when, a very tired, and restricted, squad will have played two more games!

Hopefully then relief will arrive in the form of a defeat in the Trophy on Wednesday. It would release us from the competition and provide us with a badly needed rest between games. Accepted, a visit to Wembley is a big prize, but at the cost of us being relegated? No thank you!!

Come on you Blues!!