



Saturday 8th December 2018



Portsmouth 2 - Southend 0



Heavy, grey clocked clouds shrouded the horizon as TBII began her ascent. Approaching an angle of almost 90 degrees, she was steadily clawing her way up towards the sky. Crampons would have been a definite advantage as so too would have been a tank or two of oxygen as we began to enter the death zone. Even the Yeti avoided this region like the plague but the laws of geography, as laid down by the ancient glaciers who too had pulled up their skirts at the terrifying thought of venturing any further South, decreed that, if we were to meet our goal of travelling closer to the equator, then through the lands of gluttonous mud and acrid swamps we would have to pass. And so our climb continued.

Strangely, and defying all natural logic, the air was actually getting thicker rather than thinner as the altimeter reported higher and even higher altitudes. To our rear, we could just about glimpse the beautiful clear blue skies that had accompanied us on our journey to the county border. But, as a line in the mire had got crossed and a certain four letter word took over control of the atlas, for as far as the eye could espy, there was nothing but a depressing gloom. But then Kent's like that!

NASA and their Russian equivalents spent millions and millions financing efforts to put one of their native countrymen into space. The constructors of a certain bridge achieved much the same thing, cheaper, quicker and with far less fuss, if you discount all the fraying ropes of course. There's even talk of supplementing their oversized monstrosity with a tunnel, only the budget keeps on rising. Why worry though when a well-aimed torpedo would not only improve the skyline but also produce many of the raw materials that would be required for such a subterranean adventure!

Our mood, which had been uncharacteristically upbeat, started to dip as we began our steep descent. Actually it was more of a suicide dive as we hurtled downwards, head first towards the land of the terminally disgusted and even more disgusting. Trigger, sunk deep inside a crossword that was producing many, sensing the change in atmosphere, timorously enquired 'Are we there yet?'

Depends, one supposes, upon what's meant by 'there'. We were certainly here, fleeing with hundreds of other desperate refugees towards the west. But was 'here' the 'there' that our dormouse was asking about or was 'here' somewhere else completely? A Zen type question that we could not answer because, after that brief surface disturbance, Trigs head had sunk back deep down below the surface, snug and comfortable once more inside his book of puzzles. Bless.

There again, having consumed three Christmas dinners inside the space of 18 hours, two on the same day, one at lunchtime, the other in the evening, it was small wonder that he was feeling so sleepy. The tribal elders though were anything but. Albert had discovered the wonders of internet shopping and so was now complaining about the number of parcels that kept appearing upon his doorstep whilst Boycie, bemused and exhausted after long bouts of babysitting his grandchildren, sought some sort of peace of mind speculating about today's team line up.

He wasn't being helped by Grandad who, banished to one of the supporters' coaches, was, as per usual, reporting rumour as substantiated fact. Accordingly Boycie was fretting over news that Cox was injured and

therefore would not be playing. Unimpressed with our midweek strike force at Loo Ton he couldn't even see us forcing a goal kick today, let alone a goal!

Still the miles somehow passed as they grumbled away and before overly long we were on final approach to the ground. Cunningly hidden away in somewhere called 'Frinton', it was surrounded by streets that twisted and turned more than a bad murder mystery. Even worse, a landing site for TBII could not be found. But then a large yellow brick of a building stirred something inside the porridge that is Albert's brain. It was just as if a light bulb had suddenly exploded because he abruptly jerked awake in his seat and began excitedly claiming that he knew where he was!

Now for most of us this is a pretty basic instinct. But in Albert's case it was somewhat of a revelation. And even more startling, he actually did. Not sure that there would be much money were his voice to be recorded such that it could strike fear into those accessing navigation systems across the globe, but, on this one occasion, it was proving its worth (A rusty threepenny bit and an I.O.U note signed by Rodney) as he directed us toward a carpark that was only a stroll and a hop from the ground. Albert's do then have their uses ... sometimes!

Although a brief comfort break had been taken on the way down, nature was announcing its presence once again as we passed through the away turnstiles. Now anyone who has been to Frinton Park in recent years will know just how dire their facilities are; a see through plastic curtain held in place by a few nails being the only barrier between the ladies thrones and hundreds of supporters making their way up rows of steep steps towards their seats. However that has now all changed and, in place of Victorian plumbing, namely a cattle trough and a bucket! were modern, clean and well-lit toilets. Took you a while Portsmouth but nevertheless a relief to see.

What was not was the gale force wind and pouring rain that greeted us as we took to our seats. Positioned close to the pitch we would evidently be spending the afternoon, not only being thrashed by Portsmouth, but also by the elements. Albert, having already experienced his monthly bath, was not impressed. He was not in his designated seat either. Having barely hung around long enough to experience even a face wash, he had headed straight back up the stand to claim territory that was somebody else's. Did he care? Not a whit!

'I ain't moving', he belligerently cried, aggression flowing out of him like a bulldog full of adrenaline and suspiciously obtained butchers sausages, "I ain't getting wet for no one" he went on to assert, his badger like whisker's all a quiver. Albert had made his point and, for our part, huddled together as we were under his 'protective' umbrella, if he wanted to be our General, then so be it. Besides watching a strike force of petrified stewards trying to deal with an irate Uncle Albert would more than make up for any size of defeat to come. Cromwell's army had tried and failed, so no bunch of weekend warriors, even if their uniforms did proudly declare 'Pompey play up' rather than 'Check mate', had a pray.

But, even halfway up the stand, we were still liable to get soaked should a downfall of liquid sunshine coincide with a blast of the fierce wind that was also sweeping around the stadium. Not sure who designs these things, someone who sits in a directors box possibly, but more attention to the protective cover provided by stand roofs would be a welcome. Someone other than the still ruffled Albert was though taking protective methods. His Christmas turkey and brussels now no more than a fond burp, Trigs was beginning to take considerable interest in the Cornish pasties (yes plural) that had been cowering away in a corner of his hamper.

Each the size of Hampshire, their survival rate could be measured in microseconds as Triggers jaws sprung into action. If eating was an Olympic event then Trigs mantelpiece would be loaded down with gold medals in place of discarded food wrappers. He truly is an eating machine. But, to look at him, 5ft something and as thin as a garden rake, you would never guess. Where does it all go?

The teams came out and surprise, surprise Cox was amongst them. No broken leg, no strained muscles and nobody to support him. Chrissy's team selection, restricted as his options undoubtedly were, was nevertheless causing much discussion. Particularly so was his decision to move Elvis over from his usual

position at left back to serve over on the right. With Hendrie, at long last, showing a decent bit of form, this struck quite a lot of people as being strange.

Of course squad rotation is vital if our players are to remain fresh (If indeed a seat on the bench can be considered a 'rest') but a lot of trust was being granted to a youngster who is still learning the game. Equally, were he to have a bad one, then the experience could affect his game for quite some time. Big call Chrissy! There again, what other choices did he have?

Sure, he could have adopted a 4 4 2 approach rather than the more unpopular 4 5 1 that we started this match with. But that raises two questions, one being the identity of the second striker, and, given that it was felt that Hendrie needs a break, who should cover the right back position. Perhaps a formation of 3 5 2 then, just play with centre halves. That could have worked, but still the question surrounding our second striker remains extant.

There is an argument that it could just be 'anyone'. Two players attracting more attention from defenders than just one. It's a proposition that has some attractions, that is until the lights go on as the opposition realise that although we have a certain strength in numbers up front, our actual strike ability is still restricted to one! And now we are in an even worse position because not only is 'anyone' playing out of position, but they are not contributing to the game anymore. It's an argument that could rumble on late into the evening and, like distant thunder, it will always be in the background whenever we play 4 5 1. Hopefully though lightning will strike during the January sales and this oh debatable issue can then be put to rest. Fingers crossed!

We started the game aggressively, pushing Pompey onto the defensive. And had we but an honest referee, great things might have occurred, Unfortunately though we had yet another specimen from the danker depths of the pond who could not have been more home biased had he been wearing one of their shirts. Thirty long minutes were to pass before we got awarded a free kick, a period by which they had been awarded five or six. Bunn got wiped out as he prepared to strike from just out of the box, Cox, after he had skilfully chipped a defender to be through on goal, was bundled to the ground and yet not a peep came from the blind, deaf and doubtless well paid official.

Much attention is given to players who, more accustomed to crowds of 4 or 5,000, suddenly are asked to play in front of numbers far exceeding those numbers, but little about the effect it has upon officials. This creature was so under the home crowd control that he was almost in a trance. Anybody from the F.A reviewing this game on tape could not help but be struck at the number of one sided decisions that took place. However as unlikely as that particular event is likely to be. The chances that any action would then be taken are even less!

Small wonder then that Portsmouth are where they are, on top of the division. Certainly on their play they are not worthy of such heights. Indeed it was only their strike power, and our inability to deal with crosses, that set us apart. Any neutral (Don't bother looking towards the officials!) watching this encounter would have thought that it was we, and not they, who were heading for the Championship. Well providing that is that they closed their eyes once we got within spitting distance of their penalty area!

Our game up to that imaginary line was actually rather good. Even at times fairly spectacular. But once the glint in defenders eyes hardened so our ability to pass to each other, let alone take a shot, just dissolved. It was almost as if the headache that our approach play had been causing them had encountered Aspirin or something because, for the defending forces, the pain simply just went away. But not for us! And although great marks are merited for huff and puff, when it came to the business of knocking down the door we are just a disorganised pack of mongrels howling at the moon!

Inevitably, on their first meaningful attack, Portsmouth scored. Or rather we did it for them; Turner hitting the ball into the back of his own net. They didn't deserve it and we certainly didn't either. But such is our luck at the moment. Still, for a while we fought back well, trying to get a goal of our own. But for that to happen something called a shot has to occur and we weren't even firing blanks!

No one, no one in our side, seems willing, or indeed able, to take a pop at goal. If there's an option to move the ball sideways, upwards, or even backwards, then we will take it in preference to giving the goalkeeper some exercise. Before games, our goalkeeping coach warms up our keepers with shots, so well-aimed and delivered, that he puts our forwards to shame. There then Chrissy! There's your second striker!

A hypothetical question, raised only in the spirit of mischievousness. But, if you lived close, say a door or two away, from a certain prolific striker from our past. Would not a hint drop from your lips that his old team could benefit from some of his advice and experience. Just saying 😊

Actually, given how woeful is our strike rate, perhaps he could be the answer to Chrissy's problems. Well, at least until January! But, all joking apart, our inability to give keepers a rough time is a massive problem. It's also extremely frustrating given how attractive some of our approach play is. Of course at times it could be faster, much faster, but still it has a certain hint of something that, if only Hopper and perhaps Barrett were available, could become rather special. However at the current moment it's little more than a way for us to pass the time before conceding another goal.

Something that duly arrived halfway through the first half as we struggled, yet again, to deal with a decent cross into the area. Where once there had been a faint hope there was now only darkness; our game reflecting this as we began to fall apart. Inviting Pompey onto us, we fell deeper and deeper; our ventures into their half now being almost as rare as the state openings of Rodney's wallet. Gloomy forecasts of 4, possibly 5 nil defeats now seeming only too possible.

No Bluebell equivalent at halftime, few smiles either. No one was looking forward to what we were about to get. We had started the game quite well but just as soon as the goals had gone in so hearts had begun to drop and, if Portsmouth wanted to tuck in, we were now surely a serve yourself eat as much as you like buffet. Cor, can you just imagine the waiters' expressions as Trigs walked through the door!

But a surprise, Turner, who had had a disappointing first half (It was later revealed that he had been injured), had gone off and in his place was the contentious Hendrie. Furthermore we were changing to a 4 4 2 formation. Interesting, as so too was the argument concerning whether or not Pompey were sitting back on their two goal lead because now there was only one team running the game and it wasn't the home side! We looked far more balanced in this set up and we were remaining just as pretty as regards play. But when it came to leaving our mark we were still nevertheless remained only jelly fish attempting to eat our way through the Hoover dam!

That said, we were at least now storming forward again, hurricane SUFC, and causing them all sorts of problems. Everywhere that is except inside their area which seemed to be an almost no go area to our players. Had their passports been rescinded, were their inoculations not up to date? No idea, but for whatever reason all flights, bar those involving corners and the still very rare free-kicks, into the Portsmouth area had been cancelled. A situation that left Cox looking very forlorn.

Along with Elvis, White and Moore, he had been putting everything into his game. But run off his marker as he did, create space as he did, balls either arrived at mach2 speed or bypassed him entirely. Then when he did receive a decent ball, there was no one alongside him to take advantage of it. Even playing 4 4 2, (It's possible that either Bunn or Deing were considered to be the second forward but as both were having an off day it was difficult to say), we were remaining as toothless as Albert's bedside jar come mid-morning.

Accordingly Chrissy introduced other changes, Yearwood and Robinson both making second half appearances. One was a success, the other sadly not so much. Yearwood always seems to struggle for some reason to regain his form following an injury and, that he has still to rediscover it, was only too evident as pass after well intended pass went astray. Doubtless, had any of those passes succeeded, then a way through on goal would have been opened up. So there's nothing wrong with his game picture, just his execution of it. But that will come.

No what was the surprise, certainly to the Thunderbirds, was what Robinson brought with him to the game. Accurate passing, trapping of the ball, fierce shooting and even tackles! Either some ringer was dressed up as him or his drug test after the game was at risk of going through the roof because this just was not the Robinson that we have seen over recent weeks. He looked a completely new player and suddenly Portsmouth's goalkeeper's afternoon had taken a turn for the worse.

If only, if only, he could put in constant performances like this for 90 minutes. But, as Chrissy P has himself said, had our season gone to plan and not been so devastated by injuries, then Robinson's role would have been mainly that of an impact player, introduced from the bench in the final 20 minutes or so to see if he could help swing / maintain a game in our favour. Today, he was doing just that!

However the journey from two goals down, against a team that is top of the league, at their place and against a referee who only awarded us four free kicks (and one of them was an offside) in the entire game was always going to be a difficult one. So although Robinson had added more than a degree of two of extra heat to our game, these dampening influences ensured that our visit to the South Coast was pointless. Few had expected it to be otherwise in all truth and at least the hiding that so many had been expecting, failed to materialise.

Still though, if we had been steadier in front of goal (And more ambitious) and had we also had an unbiased referee, then things might have gone differently. As it was though, we had only a flurry of yellow cards to take home with us. Justified they had been, but then their players had been guilty of committing similar, and worse, crimes without any hint of censure. We might well have never been in the Premiership and mucked it up, but that doesn't mean we are second class citizens. 'Fair Play' is one of your slogans F.A. It's more than time that you started playing your part in it too!

Come on you Blues!!