



Saturday 15th December 2018



Southend 3 – Accrington 0



The book of Albert is a short read as indeed so too is the length of each of its words. Its few paragraphs contain little to hold the interest of a philosopher seeking the meaning of life. But, should you require instruction on say, which way up to hold a bottle or maybe the quickest way to send someone to sleep, then it's a pocket sized sizzler.

Unlikely as it is to feature amongst any book list recommended by the clergy, it nevertheless has a certain relevance. Targeted at an audience whose reading rate per minute matches the climbing rate of a brick, the pamphlet, explains, in quite some colour, its authors various views and takes on the world. A prime example being that having indulged in a bath one week, avoid like the plague any chance of a watery encounter the next!

So, having enjoyed the pleasures of being soaked to the skin at Portsmouth last Saturday, one glance at the leaden skies hovering over the Essex Rivera was enough to persuade the tribal elder in question to just snuggle back down deeper into his bed of straw and to forget any idea of venturing out to see this game. The several bottles whose labels he could just espy behind a gigantic block of cheese no doubt playing a major part in his decision making too!

So the Thunderbirds nest was minus one crabby, fidgety and extremely vocal individual as it prepared for the game. But, just as we were all thinking "There is a god after all", so replacements in the form of Micky Pearce and Cassandra arrived on the scene. Generously minded, they had decided to bring over with them from the continent, its rather inclement weather system. Accordingly herds of clouds were relieving themselves of their icy contents whilst a fierce and bitterly cold gale flew down the length of the pitch.

Christmas, according to almost every card, is a perfect scene of gently settling snow falling around a cheerful looking cottage that is, more often than not, being picketed by a future Bamby burger. Now either the illustrator(s) in question have been guilty of sneaking into Albert's wine cellar or they have extended their artistic licence way beyond its limits. Because, just a few days before chimney stacks all over the globe get invaded, the only white stuff in sight was the frost that was beginning to form upon the players shirts as they 'warmed' up. Roots Hall, the beautiful lady that she looked with her floodlight candles burning brightly in the afternoon gloom, equally could hardly be described by even the most biased eye as a countryside dwelling and as for the a graceful form of a slab of venison, the pickle sandwich that Trigs was cramming into his mouth didn't come anywhere near!

Indeed, as we lined up for the mandatory mooshbook photo (Denzil doesn't believe he exists unless he appears upon it at least five times a day) we looked more like Captain Scott's party as they prepared to take a stroll towards the South pole than a group of supporters anticipating a fine match to come. Wrapped up inside several layers of clothing, with scarves tightly surrounding necks and hats firmly pushed down over protruding ears, no self-respecting family of penguins was more prepared for the condition to come than we. Or so we all thought!

Because the weather was really becoming more and more atrocious. Sure, polar bears would probably have considered it as nothing more than sun bathing weather, but, sharp as our bite might be when it comes to match officials, no pack of killer whales are we, and so we shivered, and we got wet and we froze. Even so,

uncomfortable and cold as we were, the confines of the West Stand did at least offer us some protection. But what about our poor players!

Completely exposed to the elements, and in short sleeves, they had little other choice other than to try and survive in conditions that would have sent Eskimo heading for cover. Rain, or so the weathermen would have us believe, falls. If that is indeed the case, then everyone out there on the pitch, teams, officials and even the drowning worms, weren't experiencing a rainstorm. Rather they were being swept aside by an incoming tidal flood of chilly, icy, water that totally soaked through each and every shirt within seconds of arriving. The RNLA has a fantastic reputation for both bravery and seamanship but not one of its coxons would even have considered launching in such a malevolent circumstances and yet, somehow, both teams had to find a way of playing a game of football in it. It was clearly then going to be case of who was up for it the most!

In a post-match interview, Mantom revealed that the team had been watching some videos of how Accrington play. Fast, attacking starts being very much a feature of their game. Accordingly we should have been prepared as, right from the kick off, they went for our throats. However it appeared to catch us very much on the back foot and although their attacks weren't coming to much, they outnumbered ours by a factor of around 5 to zilch!

According to the current form books we and they are the two strongest teams in the division; supporting as we do the weight of all the others above us. On this evidence though our visitors would soon be far above us, in terms of league position as well as form, because we looked very second hand in comparison. Whilst they played the ball around swiftly and accurately at ground level, we could only hack at it and hoof it into the air. In all truth we looked a complete shambles.

Therefore when we took an undeserved lead after Cox's goal bound shot had been saved only for Mantom to seize the opportunity to score from the rebound in the 19th minutes it was all a bit of a surprise. A very welcome one to be sure but Accrington must have felt like they had just been mugged. So, when just five short minutes later we did it again, the pin ball machine once more deciding in our favour as, following blocked attempts by Hendrie and Moore, Cox gleefully steered the ball into the back of the net, they must have been wondering just what was going on. They had by far been the better team and yet were two goals behind. It was a feeling that we knew only too well though; the game at Sunderland in particular coming very much to mind!

Arctic regions suffer from something called whiteouts. They occur when snow falls so thickly that visibility drops to around zero. White coloured crystals weren't exactly much in evidence, but something very much akin to a whiteout was nevertheless occurring as almost impenetrable walls of water swept down the pitch. With the wind to our backs, we only had to deal with this phenomenon when retreating; indeed it proving to be quite an advantage to us whenever we did advance. But to Accrington, playing so well but nevertheless two goals down, it must have seemed as if the world was coming to an end.

Smile me might well have done, but, defending the North Bank goal as we would be in the second period, just how well or otherwise we would cope with the same problem was the subject on many a lip during halftime. Well at least those that weren't taking the opportunity to thaw themselves out on hot cups of tea and coffee. Which brings us to another, related, subject. That of cockles!

It has been well established over many seasons that, whilst the West Stand, and to some degree the South, indulges in a spot or two of singing or chanting, the East much prefers to shy away and allow its almost comatose inhabitants to sip their tea and gum their plates of shellfish in peace as the game passes almost unnoticed in front of them. Indeed, it must at times be a scene very reminiscent of Old Leigh at low tide as the cleaners (Our apprentices?) arrive to clear away all the mess in there following a game.

Therefore it was with some astonishment that cries of, not only support, but also admonishment of the officials were heard coming from its direction in the second period. Had Albert abandoned his treasured bottles and came to the game after all, albeit getting confused when it came to his choice of stands, or was there indeed intelligent life to our East after all?

Further studies will of course have to be conducted, after all the spirit of seasonal cheer (A little something with your teabag sir?) might have encouraged this uncustomary behaviour. But if it is a sign of things to come

then, one day, who knows, we might almost have as much influence over the officials as other clubs most certainly do. Keep it up chaps, and if you need song sheets then pop on over to the West Stand. Just be careful not to ask for Marlene!

In the spirit of the Musketeers, our substitutes had been sent out at halftime to 'enjoy' the same conditions as that their teammates had been suffering for 45 minutes. The opportunity to indulge in a spot of team bonding was though ensconced by Accrington's manager who kept all his troops under cover during the break. Wimpy Northerners! However it did provide him with an opportunity to recharge their waning batteries such that, when his team appeared in the second half, they pretty much ruled the game.

We were of course now battling against a tide of still torrential rain and a wind that was growing stronger by the minute. Oxley, who surely must score a goal directly from one of his kicks one day, struggling to even kick the ball as far as the halfway line. There the ball would go, travelling high up into the sky at a rate of knots, and below it would pass the edge of the penalty box before, almost as if grasped by an invisible giant's hand, it would come to an abrupt stop and then just drop. Small wonder then that we were now spending less time inside their half than Rodney does, wallet and anchor chain at the ready, in the vicinity of any bill!

So of course we scored a third!

A neat pass from Cox sent Robinson racing through on goal, just the keeper between him and glory, and our randomly out of, randomly in form forward made no mistake in planting the ball firmly into the back of the net. It was the decisive goal and Accrington knew now that, try as they still did, it just wasn't going to be their day. Or that of the 90 or so supporters that had accompanied them down on the long journey to this game. So all credit to them for making the effort and hopefully the journey back home was not as bad as their day at the seaside turned out to be.

From our point of view though, three tremendously important points had been earned, not through playing great football, but by showing a lot of grit and determination. John White on two occasions and young Elvis on another, both showing their commitment to the cause as they threw their bodies in the way of goal bound shots. But others around them too had stood up to be counted in a game where not only the opposition had to be beaten, but also the appalling conditions.

Few of them hang around following the final whistle to accept our applause. And who could blame them! We were half frozen under shelter so how they must have been feeling after 90+ minutes of getting drenched in freezing cold water whilst at the same time being chilled to the bone by a fierce, unforgiving, icy wind, can only be imagined. Questions have rightly been asked in recent weeks about our team's character and strength. Some do remain, but others were well and truly answered today. Well done lads!

Come on you Blues!!