



Saturday 22nd December 2018



Southend 1 – Rochdale 2



Albert wasn't happy. He wasn't Sneezzy, Doc or Bashful either. However the diminutive linesman running the line in front of the West Stand might well have been called both dopey and sleepy given his inept performance. But that is getting a little ahead of ourselves because, in the now, it was a small, innocent looking, plastic container that was causing our tribal ancient to feel so grumpy.

Occupying the space that he normally graces at games, it was preventing him from relaxing and so time to recover from his exertions. The trip down from the bar after sampling some Christmas spirit is never a steady one; there are so many steps for one thing. Then he had to find the right aisle and how can anyone be expected to remember a seat number that runs to three digits when there's so much noise going on?

Some women was standing out on the pitch and giving it the full Sadler's Wells. Stretching out every word (Her mobile phone bill must be the size of the national debt if she speaks as long windily as she sings!) her voice was bellowing out of every speaker making conversation, and indeed Alberts attempts at accurate navigation, almost impossible. The speakers in the West Stand are really loud and so, as she hit the high notes seemingly with a hammer, the coffee cup that was giving the Thunderbirds most aged delinquent so much grief began to vibrate.

Already in a volcanic state, (Does anybody know how football clubs always manage to get their water to be so hot without it simply steaming away?) the cup was in real danger of erupting. Now the seat it was resting upon was no stranger to being introduced to wet, warm liquid. An experience it shares no doubt with many of its cousins over in the East Stand. But Albert was not prepared to find himself, innocent or not, facing certain accusations should such a situation now occur and so he wanted the cup removed. Like now!

However its recovery action had to be put on hold as more of the Thunderbird tribe had just begun to arrive on the scene. Denzil's backpack, full of lotions and fruit flavoured sanitizers, was swinging about dangerously as he turned around and around, a dog finding the warmest spot in his bedding, as he tried to explain to everyone, all at the same time, just why he was so late once again! The Greens having completed their descent over several rows of seating were exchanging Christmas greeting with all and sundry (Normal people, even those on the border line like Albert, first locate their row and then wander along it. But not the caretakers at Tracy Island International Airport who for some reason much prefer to enter the first row that they spot and then clumber over any number of chair backs until they arrive at their destination. Mad!). And Trigs, well Triggers nose was buried so deep inside his junior crossword puzzle that we all suspected that the clue that was the focus of so much of his attention must involve food somewhere along the line. It was all situation normal then, then inside the T'Birds nest!

Let but a premiersip player at a club like Chelsky break even a fingernail and it is lamented over for weeks by both social media and by the press, yet the injury crisis that has gripped Blues by the throat has somehow escaped such notice. Even the Black Plague did not affect such a high percentage of the population, and it has left Blues in a situation where only seven or eight players are fit enough to even train, let alone play a match. One of them, well at least until Friday, was Oxley. But some accident yesterday put his back out and so now our third choice keeper was warming up between the sticks instead of him. Malcolm Allison once famously brought in a psychic to exorcise the bad spirits said to be surrounding his club. Perhaps Chrissy should consider doing the same!

Looking around the pitch though we looked to have a squad that was fit and raring to go. But just how many were carrying knocks and injuries that, under more normal circumstances, would have seen them rested for a period? No idea, but given the way that we played in the first half it can't have been an insignificant number! Eleven, no ten (Robinson was strolling!), blue shirts might well be running around the field but headless chickens came far more easily to mind than any comparison with the Red Devils flying team.

Our play was uncoordinated, our passing unfocused and as for any kind of formation! Well some might have called it 4 5 1, others 4 3 2, but in all truth no one, least of all our players it seemed, really knew just what it was. It couldn't have been more confusing had it been an episode of 3 2 1. Our shape, all round play and, sad to say, attitude, was very disappointing. As ever it appears, only Cox, Elvis and White seemed at all interested in getting damp armpits, their team mates much preferring to preserve theirs in pristine condition.

Oh there was a bit of effort here and a catch of the breath there, but Rochdale could have put eleven of their supporters on the pitch (Well done the 100 or so who made the trip down by the way) and still walked the first period. Some accuse Chrissy of filling the team's heads with tactics; others throw accusations at his team selection. It's possible that all have some validity, but, at the end of the day, not only are our manager's options very restricted, but it's also down to how the players themselves perform. Robinson in particular needing to ask himself some very hard questions. Just how he could still be wandering back up the field long minutes after the ball has been stuck inside our area, is a mystery. That's unless of course you take into account the fact that his contribution throughout the game barely beat that of Rodney's charity donations over the past decade!

Now apart from one or two Thunderbirds, we are all of an age that we can actually claim to have seen England win a major competition. And as such we were all taught at school how to do the maffs inside our heads. No allowing computers or calculators into exam rooms for us. You either could count or you couldn't. A fact that might go a long way towards explaining just why the vertically challenged linesman in front of us was having so much trouble recognising offside.

The equation itself wasn't so hard. Count the number of defenders behind or level with the nearest member of the opposition and if you are clutching just one claw or less, wave your flag. But do you think he could get it right. Time after time, Rochdale were offside, but either he was too slow to get into position to see, or his mental arithmetic abilities were on par with Denzil's. Either way, he never got the call right.

Suspicions were therefore raised about Rochdale's opening goal. That they deserved it was in little doubt. But the manner in which it arrived was more than questionable. Still, respect and all that. So if the F.A. are happy enough trotting out officials with the numerical ability of anyone who finds the Saturday night TV schedule scintillating, then who are we to complain? And what would be the point anyway!

In any case, blaming the officials, incompetent as this one most certainly was, would be to avoid the point. Whilst we were seemingly content to play like we were total dross, Rochdale were faster to the ball, more accurate in their passing and so far away from us in terms of being up for it, that their postcards were taking weeks to arrive. They were also rather physical.

Put us up against a side that plays football, and we will compete. Put us up against a 'name' side and we will compete. But put us against a side that likes to exercise a bit of muscle and we vanish even faster than a pair of Triggers meat pies. In midfield we have players like Mantom and Dieng who should have no fear of mixing it. But alas they most apparently do, and in spades! So, as in this match, that area of the pitch just gets totally surrendered to the opposition.

Akinfenwah gets lambasted for both his size and girth but, had we but a player like him in the squad, then things might be very different. So why haven't we? A tough question because there are so many possible answers. Perhaps Chrissy never even considered it, possibly transfer funds went in another direction, and maybe, given their form when he first arrived at the club, he expected much, much more from the likes of Kightly and Robinson. There's even a chance that Chrissy did go after such a player but another club landed him instead. Totally an unknown then. But how badly do we need someone who would introduce some backbone into the team. Perhaps in January though?

Halftime arrived with us just having that one goal deficit. It might well have been more and that a lifeline remained in view was somewhat of a wonder for us to consider during the break. Well once upon a time that would have been the case may be, but now, with palm jewellery totally ruling people's lives, almost every head was bowing towards a handheld god rather than indulging in conversation. So, with religious ceremonies being performed everywhere around, Mike's attention turned towards the Blue Belles who, fitted out in bright red Christmas tunics, were bouncing around enthusiastically close to the centre spot. Oh that our team would show so much energy and spark.

Such fireworks though were not much in evidence as the second half commenced. However there was the odd sparkler or two, and the exchange of raincoats that had occurred just before the restart (One Mac being swapped for another, McCoulsky coming on for McLaughlin) did, for a brief period, cause headaches for our visitors defence. Alas though, whilst he kept them on their toes with regard to at least moving around (Robinson had opted for the statue approach) they soon realised that he had less bite than an anorexic goldfish and so quickly relaxed again. Bristol City must surely be expecting to see him back next month.

But at least we were showing a bit more spirit now and it even got to the point that their goalkeeper had to put down his copy of Trigs crossword puzzle and so get involved in the game. Almost totally unemployed in the first half, apart from when Robinson somehow blazed over the bar when it was easier to score, he was now getting to see some of the action. However, get a number of free kicks and corners as we were now doing, another skill gap that we nowadays is the lack that of someone who is able to take free kicks.

Coker and Bunn are both unavailable through injury and so Mantom was being called upon. He did his best, but ... still at least we were now doing a bit of attacking. In fact we were doing so, so much that more than a bit of pressure was beginning to grow upon Rochdale's now rather fragile looking lead. A fact that drove them to indulge in some blatant time wasting. The worst example being when, just as we prepared to take yet another corner in a series of about four or five, their manager pretended to want to make a substitution. He got booked for his troubles but he nevertheless still succeeded in his aim of providing his players with a couple of valuable seconds within which to regain their composure. Something that they duly did, meaning that we had to retreat back to square one and then start all over again.

Far to the north is a bumpy land where the men wear short skirts and fall over after just one pint. Accordingly it's rare that they are ever sober, but when they are, they talk in hushed tones about some bloke who hid about in caves and watched spiders. Apparently he serves as some sort of inspiration to them, even though all he ever did was rabbit on and on about some egg shaped balls. "Try, try again" he is supposed to have wailed, and that was just precisely what we were now doing.

And our reward?

Only Roots Hall exploding into excitement and joy as John White pulled us back level!!

Mantom's corner in front of the South Bank had been headed on by Moore towards White, who throwing all caution to the winds, bravely dived into a tangle of bodies in order to guide the ball home. Wow, what a relief! With time fast running away it had looked like we would never score. But now that we had and were in the ascendancy, surely there was just enough time left in the game for a winner!

And there was!

Just one problem. We didn't score it, they did!

Instead of simply continuing on and keeping Rochdale firmly on the back foot, we had retreated at least 30 yards back towards our own goal and so invited them onto us. We didn't even ask for an RSVP!

Not that they were in any mood to send one. More than a tad annoyed at letting us back into the game, they swarmed forwards in waves; signalling clearly that they wanted to score again. But did we take any notice? Not on your nelly! Instead we just collected together around our area and tried to play defence against a very determined attack.

You would think that the lessons provided by Charlton and Peterborough would have warned them just how dangerous a ploy that was. But no, like Albert playing with matches and wondering why his fingers keep

hurting, we just persist in dropping far too deep whenever we feel the need to defend a lead or, as in this case, a point. A point that we did not get as, following a period in which we had had at least two or three clear chances to clear the ball away, Rochdale scored the goal that they had been so urgently seeking.

It wasn't though a case of Christmas comes early for them because, although we did play better in the second half, it was only in comparison to the first. Accordingly, questionable time wasting activities apart, their performance merited taking home all three points with them. Just as our concert party attitude had been met with its appropriate award of nothing!

A few of our players did wear their hearts on their sleeves and bore the clubs badge with pride. Too many others though just treated the badge as a smoking jacket adornment whilst they relaxed by a blazing fire smoking a cigar or perhaps sipping from a glass. Even worse, one player in particular treated it almost with contempt. So lazy and uncaring was their attitude throughout almost the entire game.

It should be remembered though that Christmas is traditionally the pantomime season. And someone has to play the clowns. But, rather than that being us all the time, we have to get other teams worrying that 'He's behind you'. And until that happens, we are just going to continue on being a Jekyll and Hyde side, winning one week, losing the next. Mr Kipling claims to have discovered the secrecy of consistency; it's now gone far beyond the point where we need to do so too!

Come on you Blues!!