



Wednesday 26th December 2018



Oxford 0 - Southend 1



Bert, the snowman at Tracy Island International was asleep. It was Boxing Day morning and all the excitement of the day before had just caught up on him. But then, as the sound of powerful jet engines swept overhead, he quickly snapped to attention; for all the world an alert and keen watchman that, although having been on duty all night, was still up for the job.

Then his shoulders slumped back down again. Keeping a careful eye upon who went and out through the passenger terminal doors was no sinecure, especially when dodgy looking characters like the one who was now stumbling across the concourse appeared. This one was a regular. Furthermore he never ever said "Good morning" or indeed offered any other sort of greeting. Even a grunt would have been welcomed as some sort of acknowledgment. But, as per usual, Bert's presence got totally ignored as the security entry system took a right bashing.

It was mistake. A big one. Something that the individual in question realised almost straight away. His mind befuddled through lack of sleep and his brain still recovering from the copious amount of alcohol that it had been introduced to just a few hours earlier, loud, sharp knocking noises were not quite the order of the day. Still, his body was no stranger to such situations and so, as the door slid open he managed to remain upright, just, thus avoiding the ignominy of having to admit that his younger brother could hold his liquor better.

The islands two security guards took one sniff before immediately turning tail and heading straight back towards their barracks. Some things went way beyond the call of duty! Marlene, caught in indecision over whether or not to add just one more case to the pile of luggage that was already totally taking up most of the booking hall's floor, tentatively attempted a smile in the direction of the newcomer. Her hubby, who had correctly assessed the situation just as quickly, was far less diplomatic; greeting his sibling with as loud a voice as he could muster. Albert was not at all appreciative.

Outside of the terminal, the sound of other aircraft landing could be heard. Grandad had just touched down and even exited the runway so another aircraft was beginning its approach. The hinterland around the airport, made up as it was of swamp, bogs and damp marshland decorated by the occasional lost seabird, was being given a rude awakening. The circus was back in town!

Sometime later with one of our away coaches, previously blue but now painted bright orange (Was Easy Jet taking over our supporters club?) Filling TBII's broad and expansive window screen, the conversation was not about the game ahead, our injury concerns or even formations. Instead it was centred upon chairs!

Albert's daughters, at a total loss as to what to buy for such an intransigent, obdurate and downright awkward parent, had finally settled upon something that might provide comfort to his lower regions, if not indeed his entire geography. One of the Green's grandchildren had found a similarly shaped parcel awaiting them under the Christmas tree and comparisons were being drawn.

Now, given their very disparate target audiences, one being aimed at someone who was an expert at playing, and winning, games that appeared upon a screen, the other, a being that spelt computer with a 'K', although both of the gifts in question had four legs, that was about all that they had in common. One was state of the

art, or would at least be once all the pieces had been put together. Whilst the other bore an uncanny resemblance to the sort of chair that you can just imagine a very old lady, wearing a pointed hat and black clothing, lounging about in as two small children creep into her cottage and begin admiring her oversized cooking appliances. The purchasers certainly knew their intended recipients well!

Still at least the discussion delayed Albert's fond, and very detailed, description of the meal that he had enjoyed the day before. Indeed, he was only upon its eighth course when sanctuary in the form of a service station appeared upon the horizon. He was still salivating over the results of his heroics with a nut cracker though as we pulled into a parking spot and rarely has TBII been exited so fast.

Escape drills are of course mandatory for a well-run airline such as Thunderbird Airways, but few could have been executed so quickly or as efficiently. Sadly though, the root cause of the evacuation followed us in and then just continued on from where he had left off. Pity his new chair didn't incorporate some sort of restraining device. But perhaps that's an option that his children might like to consider as an Easter present. Possibly a gag as well?

Oxford's ground is situated within a shopping complex on the edge of town. Sound familiar? A fact that meant that the stadium's car park had to be shared with people who are more focused upon some retail therapy than watching twenty two men kick around a ball. Accordingly mooring spots were at a premium. TBII having to perform three fruitless circuits before being directed towards an alternative landing field that was fortunately only a short distance away. This meant that we had to eject Albert, a process that was both noisy and extended. He was still experiencing some problems walking following the previous days celebrations. Accordingly our now remote, if only just, parking bay was probably going to be a challenge beyond him.

Set inside a small woodland, complete with running brook, it could have been an idyllic rural retreat. Instead, with shopping baskets drowning everywhere the eye turned, muddy banks littered with more refuse than an estuary beach and busy shoppers just a few yards away, it was more a place that you wanted to hurry away from. So we did, fast. Our objective, the warm insides of the ground that we could just espy peeping above the horizon.

Alas its gates were not open. So, as the warm light of the day began to fade away, we had to wait, ragged beggars around an A.T.M, until someone eventually took pity and decided to let us in. The price of a coffee providing a full explanation as to why so many of the locals had been carrying steaming beverages OUTSIDE the ground. Highway robbery is quite properly frowned upon, so why are football clubs allowed to get away with charging such exorbitant prices? A nearby supermarket was selling two huge jars of the stuff for less than Oxford were asking you to pay for a single cup. Nonsense!

Thirsty, we headed for our seats. With just 400 or so of us expected (Still double what Col Poo call a fantastic away support) the cheerful stewards (They obviously didn't have to pay for their coffee) said 'Sit anywhere'. Mike rather fancied one of the dugouts but wiser heads steered him instead towards some seating that was about halfway up the stand. A position from which we could gaze across an empty pitch towards the penalty spot. Within easy guidance providing distance of the linesman, presuming of course that he ran the line directly in front of us, it was a suitable enough location. Save that within each of our hearts was a growing dread of what was about to come.

Early on in our flight we had all confessed our forebodings about this game. After our poor display against Rochdale, little was expected and, although our record, both at Oxford and with regard to Boxing Day fixtures in general, was good, it was agreed that anything less than a four goal dubbing would be definitely looked upon as a result! With Grandad's prediction of 4 – 1 in our favour appearing to be as clear an example of foresight as that of the Titanic's look outs, we were therefore a fairly gloomy bunch as we settled down to watch the game.

With Oxley still complaining about his bad back, young Bishop was making only his second league appearance between our sticks. If our dark forecasts were right, he too might be having back trouble come the end of the

game. In front of him, Turner was being aired in place of John White. A switch that gave rise to quite some conversation amongst the away support. White has been one of our best players this season whereas Turner's form has only matched that of one of Rodney's donkeys. Resting a key player in a game that we were probably going to lose anyway made some sort of sense but it nevertheless smacked of more than a degree of defeatism.

Happily though, as it turned out, today was one of Turner's good days. An attribute that was indeed shared by most of his team mates. Accordingly, after a brief spell of early Oxford pressure within which they tried to take advantage of both Elvis's and Bishop's inexperience without receiving any tangible reward, we began to settle into the match and even, at times, impose our own game upon our hosts. Encouraging stuff.

But we were still feeling worried. It was now less about us conceding a net full of goals as Oxford walked all over us, but rather us suffering a one, or two goal defeat that, given how we were now beginning to control the game, we would probably not deserve. Fears becoming reality as, following a mix up in our defence, a pass, deflected off one of our own players legs, flew across an empty box to be met by an Oxford hoof and there was the ball, somewhat shamefully, sitting in the back of our net. Oh dear oh dear, or at least words to that effect!

But what was this? Oh what joy! What utter excitement and pleasure. That awfully nice gentleman with a flag who had been wandering about aimlessly in front of us was now waving his flag with some urgency. The referee, probably alerted by his guide dogs bark, eventually took notice and so ruled out the 'goal'. The ball had clearly come off our player so it should have stood. Accordingly, whilst we all did explain all this to each other with quite some glee, it was nevertheless conducted in whispers less the linesman hear and so change his mind. What a great job these official do. Never say a bad word about 'em.

It was very near escape though and it just served to show that, for all our pretty approach play, Oxford had only to enter our box and they could score. The same message though had got through to our players and work levels went up even further as they set about ensuring that Oxford would never again trouble Bishop. And, apart from one solitary occasion when a home player, totally unmarked at the far post, elected to head the ball gloriously wide off its target, that objective was being met by success.

Halftime though was nevertheless still greeted with quite some relief. Fully expecting to be at least two, possibly three goals down by now, equity in the score line was a very welcome result. We had worked hard inside the first period; closing their players down quickly and for once getting in their faces just as much as they did ours. At Plymouth we had showed very much the same mentality and came away with a result. We have not seen much evidence of it since, but should we be able to keep it up for just another 45 minutes or so, then a very valuable point could well be travelling home with us.

The halftime entertainment was interesting. A group of people, standing in a circle around the centre spot were going to compete in a quiz. The prize being four days in Indonesia (Just enough time to get there, recover from the jet lag and then fly back!). Each held one green card and one red. As a question was read out to them, they had to decide whether or not it was true or false; holding up the appropriate card. Whoever was left in the circle once everybody else had been eliminated through an incorrect response, would be hurrying out to the shops after the game seeking beach towels and sun lotion as the 'holiday' had to be taken up before the end of June 1019.

And so the contest began, and how Trigs and Denzil must now be regretting that they opted not to come to this match as they both would have been in their element. The questions started off gently and at Albert's level, 'How many glasses do you get out of a whisky bottle' but quickly became far more specific. Clearly Oxford wanted the winner to be a real supporter so responding correctly to things like 'Who has won the most headers for Oxford this season, x or y?' became key to anyone wishing to get sand between their toes. A tie breaker though was not required because, following the third such question, everyone remaining, bar one, had got it wrong. But the fun for us didn't stop there. Oh no!

The Thunderbirds, quite understandably, have a number of groupies. Unfortunately few of them can be described as blond, nubile or even available. But, at our time of life, one out of three a'int bad. Amongst them is a bloke whose work has led to him circumnavigating the globe. Along the way he gained a wife who now, not only accompanies him to games but, could easily be one of Marlene's backing singers. So there she was, seated right next to him as, following the winners response of 'My wife' to the question 'Who will be you be taking with you?' exclaimed loudly "That's' stupid. Just go there and bring one home with you like I did! Her response was not one of immediate pleasure. In fact that destination wasn't even upon her headboard as she began to lay into him. Violence on the terraces eh. Supposed to be a thing of the past isn't it!

Her fighting spirit was reflected by our team in the second half. Although Oxford, as in the first, started brightly, their candle quickly began to wane as we worked hard. Harassing and chasing the ball whenever it wasn't in our possession. We had a point to our names and we were determined to hold onto it if not indeed maybe improve upon it!

It's difficult to know whether or not to admire or berate Robinson. On the one hand he clearly can't hit a bar door from six inches (Cox set him up on at least three occasions but his attempts at scoring were truly pitiful) but on the other, he doesn't make any attempts either to hide on the pitch following each such a calamity. "Hey", seems to be his attitude, "That didn't work, but next time it very well just might". That sadly it never did, well in terms of a goal anyway, could not be put down to either his work rate or desire, just, it has to be said, lack of skill and steadiness in front of a goalkeeper.

An enigma wrapped up in a puzzle then, then? Not quite, but like Price, you remember him, played in the late 90's up front, big bloke, in some games he was utterly unplayable, in others it was just like he was never there. Today you couldn't fail to notice him, or unfortunately his netful of mistakes, so when Robinson received the ball out wide with just one defender to beat, we were already assessing our defenders positions and just how close they were to their opponents.

However, with one smooth movement, he deceived both the defender and us before delivering a dream of a cross into the box. And running into it were, not one, but two blue shirts, Cox and Kightly. The latter arrived first and leaping like a salmon hell bent on qualifying for child benefit, headed the ball into the net!

Describing the scenes that followed is kind of difficult because the author, along with everyone else from Essex, was going totally ape. It's possible to remember that the players ran over to us and joined in the party and it's almost absolutely certain that Albert went disco dancing all the way up and down the steps. Marlene and Mrs "Am I still married?" performed a duet that was so out of tune that it was almost an art form, whilst Boycie transformed into a steam train whose piston rods, instead of being horizontal, had gone completely vertical and were pumping up and down like mad. Everything was going completely crazy. Even Grandad was having a bit of a bop!

This was almost unbelievable. Instead of being a million goals behind, we were in front, playing well and ruddy well competing. What's more, two of our misfits had combined to put us in front. If we needed any further proof that it was indeed Christmas then it would have to involve rather a big red suit and a herd of flying herbivores that were being led by one wearing a spotlight!

Sometimes, if very rarely, you have to feel sorry for supporters of clubs like Man City etc. because they never get to experience anything like this. Expecting your team to just turn up and win every week must be very unrewarding. However when you follow a team like ours where you just never know what you are going to get, sometimes disappointment, quite often disenchantment, but occasionally, just very occasionally, something that is out of this world, then you can really appreciate and enjoy those moments when they do come along.

Wrongs may always be going to outnumber the rights but, without experiencing the lows, even floating on a cloud must surely become tame over time? But when, as now, your team does something totally unexpected then 'Wow' just doesn't come close to describing the wonderful feeling and glow that suddenly envelops not

only you, but everyone about you. Supporting clubs at our level might not result in many cups and trophies, but when you consider who are the real winners, there is just no contest!

So still bubbling over with excitement we tried to settle back down and to enjoy the game which was by now being played in almost silence. Apart, of course, from the noise that was still erupting from a rather delirious away stand. It seemed then as if Oxford supporters are clearly of an ilk who only shout for their team when they have just scored. Oh, there was the occasional chant from behind one of the goals but compared to what we, and our mad drummer, had been performing almost since kick off, they were just crumbs of dust compared to our cliff slides.

Their supporters might have been imitating church mouse but urged on by their bench, Oxford nevertheless looked very keen to bring matters back to a level basis just as quickly as they could. Accordingly they earned a number of corners, and remembering (How could we forget!) our sad record of defending set pieces, all our hearts were in our mouths whenever a flying ball came into our area. But each time that they did, so either Turner or Moore or indeed anyone in a blue shirt, was there to clear the ball to safety. Too many times this season we have looked a disparate, unorganised, bunch of misfits. Each player an island, isolated and on their own. But today, at Oxford, we were a team!

Even so, when a mistake late in the game left one of their forwards running clean through on goal, that Oxford were just about to draw even was in about as much doubt as the sight of Rodney heading for the loo leaves you in with regard to whose paying for this round. Oh well, we would certainly have settled for a point on the way up. So why not now?

That it was incredibly disappointing all the same was in no doubt. We had unexpectedly taken the lead in a game that we had all thought that we would lose heavily. Now though we were gutted to be only taking home the point that had seemed so wonderful a prospect at halftime. It remained the case, but still.

And that's just exactly what the scoreboard remained as incredibly, with Bishop bravely making himself looking a big as he could, the eventual shot went just inches wide of the far post. Phew! Boy that was way too close. No worries though. It didn't go in. So we could, rather relieved, go back to the singing and chanting and dancing and going totally mad that we all had been doing ever since the goal.

Nevertheless, it still seemed a very long time before the board finally did go up. It signalled four extra minutes. The ball was in our half and they had it, we didn't. The prize was so desperately close but could we hang on? Chrissy, playing all of his cards, broke up play twice to make substitutions. Cox, totally understanding the part that he was to play in these proceedings, hesitated briefly as he left the field to adjust his shin pads. A yellow card was his reward but his actions had put an Oxford attack on hold. It had been just long enough to break up its momentum, and now that we had the ball back, just where did Robinson think that he was taking it?

We shall never know because just at that moment a most glorious sound resounded all around the fast being deserted stadium. The final whistle had gone, we had won, and the away stand, well it had just totally lost the plot as it turned into a sea of storm tossed scarves and hats. Their totally shipwrecked owners celebrating like mad. Yes it was only a league game but no joy at a cup final could beat our collective mood of euphoria as our fantastic team ran across to share it with us. We were Blues to a man; women and child, and we weren't being at all shy about letting the whole world know all about it!

"Jingle Bells, jingle bells, jingle all away"

"Oh what fun it is to see, Southend win away!"

Come on you Blues!!