



Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2019



### Blackpool 2 - Southend 2



Bored, unoccupied and rather sleepy sales assistants gazed out across a scene full of vacant chairs and tables. Of prospective customers there was hardly a sign save that was for three dishevelled and rather weary looking blokes who had just shuffled in through the service stations entrance. Two, rather disappointingly, were carrying bags that looked suspiciously full. However the third, sporting quite a hedgerow around his chin, did look like he might be interested in say a coffee and a burger. Accordingly the occupants of the Burger King concession began to make themselves look busy.

They could have saved themselves the trouble. Denzil, his brain totally bewildered by the experience of being out in daylight for so long, was in such a dazed condition that all he was seeking was facilities that offered a certain kind of relief and somewhere to relax for a few moments. Therefore, totally blanking the Burger King staff, he wandered straight past them, heading instead in the direction of the loos. Boycie and Mike meanwhile had taken up residence at one of the many available tables and started searching through the contents of their bags.

Mrs Green had been shopping and the results of her retail therapy were now being introduced, with some considerable pleasure, to an orifice that had last been used in anger to describe a certain referee's awful performance. As he crunched down upon his steak pie, it was very evident that, whilst on a certain level Boycie was enjoying his crusty repast, on quite another he was reliving some of the events of their day. Mike too seemed lost in recollection.

The journey up to Lancashire aboard TBII had been event free. The skies being empty of any obstacles other than miles upon miles of orange coloured cones. But even these had not had too much detrimental effect upon traffic conditions and so good time had been made. Problems though had arisen during their final approach to Blackpool as Gluegool started sprouting out misleading air traffic control commands. Fortunately though Mike, his mind focussed upon his own crafts navigation system, was not distracted and so, following a smooth descent, TBII quickly found herself quickly moored just 100 yards or so away from the ground.

Denzil, aware that some sort of carnival parade was about to take place along Blackpool's seafront, immediately dashed off, all excited, in its direction. Leaving his fellow two crew members to make their own way to the ground where they planned to meet up with Grandad who, as per usual, had arrived much earlier in the day.

As they greeted one another, they noticed that there were quite a number of new looking orange home scarves and shirts about. Either the clubs souvenir shop had recently experienced a surge in trade or washing machines, all over the seaside resort, had been very, very busy. There were lots of fresh signs plastered about everywhere too. Each one claiming that the club was back. But from just where?

There was nobody we could ask as everyone appeared to be in such a hurry to do a Denzil. Accordingly they were heading elsewhere at a rate of knots. A friendly copper was available though, and he was able to direct the puzzled trio towards where the away turnstiles would eventually open. It too had rather a deserted look about it. It was also rather chilly, being sited as it was both in the shade and directly in the path of a rather

cold, brisk, wind. Still us Southerners are known for our toughness in adverse conditions and so, in that tradition, the three TBirds had manned it out.

Recalling the experience of last season, when they had been frozen stiff even inside the stadium, they were not harbouring any illusions about of their discomfort being relieved once they were inside the ground. An event that was still scheduled for some 30 minutes or so in the future. But, much to their astonishment, bright sunshine and almost tropic temperatures did greet them as they took to their seats. Armoured up as they were in winter coats, they now felt more than a tad warm and so Thunderbird flesh was soon being exposed to UV conditions of a sort that residents of the West Indies were much more accustomed to. It was not a pretty sight!

On our last visit to Blackpool, much of their ground had been deserted. Not so today. Instead, as kick off approached it was packed to the rafters with thousands of excited locals and also some 350+ travelling supporters. As well as imbibing sunshine, many of those who were singing in a tongue that clearly needed sub titles, had obviously also been indulging in more than a spot or two of drinking. They weren't exactly drunk, but to suggest that they were only a trifle merry would leave one open to suggestions that one was rather erring on the safe side.

On the preceding Tuesday, Blackpool had played at Accrington. The game being marred by both bottle and flare throwing by the away supporters. Accordingly a number of stewards were watching the uninhibited natives' celebrations with quite some concern. And, sure enough, bright orange flares soon began to make their appearance. Unwilling to spoil the party atmosphere, no official action was immediately taken, but come Monday morning, quite a rogues gallery of freshly taken photos will no doubt be being examined with both interest and intent.

Chrissy's team selection was likewise being subjected to quite some scrutiny. Moore, one of our best players this season, was on the bench whilst both Lennon and Kiernan had been released from it to form the centre of our defence. Hyam was back in midfield, returning from injury, and young Charlie Kelman was being given his full league debut upfront alongside Cox. Quite a few changes then from the side that had been so disappointing at home to Barnsley.

With most people accepting that we were extremely unlikely to gain anything from both this game and the one at Scunthorpe on Tuesday night, it was generally conceded that, if we were going to experiment and give some game time to certain players, now was the time to do it. Moore's absence from our starting line-up though was a both a surprise and a concern. Still, if we somehow managed to get a point from this game that would be fantastic, unlikely as that was going to be given the tremendous atmosphere that the home supporters were generating. They were celebrating as if they had just won promotion rather than only completed their warm ups for a match that was still some 900 minutes or so away from the season's final whistle. Unbelievable!

Noise, colour and not a little beer soaked breath their supporters most certainly had. We, in turn, had Denzil! They were bouncing up and down in their seats; our representative was quietly sorting through his man bag seeking out some scented hand lotion. They were loudly singing bawdy songs, Body Shops not so secret shopper wasn't even humming. Hardly a recipe for success then, then especially given the fiery, orange coloured, cauldron that Bloomfield Road had now become. Still, each must serve in their own way. So whilst TBII's errant navigator set about polishing his already gleaming bonce, they simply continued on going totally ape. The two teams making their way out onto the pitch with sheer bedlam breaking out all around them.

Had it been a normal league fixture; one not surrounded by the mystique of the home club returning from who knows where, then we would have easily have killed off all support for our hosts within the opening few minutes of this game. For it was us, rather than they, who were doing all the attacking. Ok, so their goalkeeper wasn't exactly suffering from shot fatigue but nevertheless, whilst Bishop worked on his sun tan, their keeper was being kept pretty honest by our efforts to score early on in the game. Encouraging stuff.

The officials too seemed to be unaffected by all the noise and excitement. So we were being able to go about our business without any stupid interruptions. And now, with Ben's casualty ward finally beginning to clear, we had quite a bit of height and strength back in our side. This we used to our advantage in the 20th minute when Rob Kiernan, making his first league game for almost two years, decided to celebrate by heading home a goal following a corner.

The away terrace went absolutely mad. Not only had our team been playing some decent football, but now we had taken a well-deserved lead. Greedy thoughts of taking home all three points gleefully entering many minds. Two thirds of the home seating, obviously thinking the same, fell silent but not so the crazy gang to our immediate right who redoubled their efforts to support their side. The contents of many a sea side pub might well be swilling around inside their stomachs but all credit must still be given to how they were now sticking with their team; giving them tremendous cheers every time they crossed over the halfway line.

Now that we had done the unforgivable, and so taken the lead inside a game when any considerate visiting side would have just meekly thrown in the towel, the officials' attitude began to change. Particular the referees. Suddenly they had complete licence to wipe our players out whereas we, in direct contrast, had merely to raise our arms, as Demitriou, one of our subs who was warming up alongside the pitch unwisely did, to get booked. It was soon getting beyond ridiculous and so Boycie's and Mikes afternoon just got better and better!

It did take quite a dent though when Blackpool equalised from close range. A question of offside did hover, but as we were all looking at the player concerned, who was standing about a gnats hair width inside the pitch, rather than across our goal mouth at the time, some licence must, albeit very reluctantly, be granted to the linesman. After all, he did have around 15,000 home fans offering him their totally unbiased advice and assistance!

More orange coloured flairs did of course go off and, had Kodak, rather than digital stock, been being employed, then enough film shots would have existed of the guilty to satisfy even Denzil's need to be shut away in the dark for hours on end. Made little difference though, we were still running the game despite all their referees' attempts to change that situation. He wasn't even being subtle about it. But then how could he? Especially when, at one point in the game, there were so many of our maimed players strewn about all over the pitch that Ben didn't know who to treat first. Still, plenty of time for him to work that all out before we took the resulting free kicks you would have thought. Except that there were none!!

Incredibly, the direct descendant of something that slided down an incontinent lizards back leg claimed that he had "Seen Nothing". An enraged Cox, foolishly catching the ball as he tried to understand how an official, positioned just feet away, had somehow totally unobserved him being blatantly fouled, did though manage to get something out of him. A yellow card! Fair enough, players are supposed to show the officials respect. But isn't that something that has to be earned?

Half time passed in a blur of more orange flares and deafening, incomprehensible, garble from the loudspeakers. No idea what language the stadium announcer was employing but even Cassandra's attempts to communicate in her native tongue (She's actually Swiss but, keen to put her cow bells past behind her, claims to be German) is more understandable. As a Health and Safety issue it was a standout example, but then the boozy locals were hardly in any condition to understand it either!

The second period, with Blues attacking the goal directly in front of us, had barely had a chance to utter its birth cries before we had gloriously retaken the lead. Again from a corner, one of our defenders, Turner, had risen to the occasion by magnificently chipping the keeper from a tight angle. As soon as the ball had left his foot you knew it was a going in, and our celebrations were quite something to behold. Few indeed were our number compared to the home forces but even so we were joyfully making sure that our voices were being heard. Well most of us at least. Denzil had just that little annoying spot that wasn't quite lotioned up enough to deal with first.

We had all said during halftime that the game had more goals in it, but, in all honesty, despite how well and hard we were undoubtedly working, few had expected it to be us who scored them. But we had happily now been proved oh so wrong and clearly it was now well and truly a case of game on. Or it would have been had we but the regular opposition forces to handle. However it was at about this point in the game that we discovered that the referee had only been using the latter periods of the first half to warm up.

Now he was going into full Cruella de Vil mode and, despite all evidence to the contrary, was awarding them free kicks when it had clearly been they who had been committing the actual fouls. Even his assessor, stroking his guide dog up in amongst all the home supporters, must have picked up a vibe or two that something wasn't quite right. But, just as the crowd invasion that brought the game to a premature end is unlikely to feature in his report, so were any of the 'little, inadvertent' mistakes by the referee. Doubt though that Cox will be dealt with quite so leniently.

Time was ticking by though and as the game entered its final 15 minutes Chrissy took action to preserve our precious one goal lead. Off came Kelman, leaving us with just one man up front, and on came Demitriou. Given that for the past ten minutes or so our forwards had hardly seen the ball ( A combination of 'unbiased' refereeing and the home teams response to their still nearly deafening support ensuring that the area around our penalty box was seeing most of the action) it was probably a wise move, even if it did leave Cox rather isolated.

A position that he so nearly exploited as, with just a few minutes left on the clock, he took on their goalkeeper, one on one. To a man, the away stand was up on his feet cheering him on, but, alas, somehow he must have signalled his intentions and so the keeper was able to pull off a brave save at his feet, denying him our third goal. Even with the referee playing as their twelfth man it would have put the games result beyond any doubt. But, instead of decorating the back of their net, the ball was now back up our end of the field and seeking a home in ours!

To further prevent this possibility, our manager made more changes, introducing additional defenders in favour of midfielders and attackers. In fact we were now playing with no one up front at all. But, with just five more minutes to go, surely the Alamo could hold out. And, had just that amount of extra time been played then we would have. But the town's future mayor, freeman of the borough and an all-round total barsteward, decided in his infinite wisdom to just keep on playing until they scored. Accordingly, although the designated amount of added time had long since passed, and despite his Micky Mouse watch and both linesman making him well aware of that fact, he just blithely carried on.

Our luck this season doesn't just stink; it's as putrid as the Football League's attitude is towards supporters who actually attend games. So when yet another cross got delivered into our box, the ball avoided both the attentions of an attacking forward and one of our defenders before deciding to strike the unsighted Moore straight in the face and rebound into the net. A four letter word, beginning with S and ending in T; very aptly describing the referee's performance!

The home crowd of course went totally mad, sparking off disgraceful pitch invasions everywhere we looked. The referee, making his first correct decision for at least 60 minutes, responded by ordering both teams off the pitch for their safety. We for our part, totally dismayed and unable to believe our bad luck, having little other choice than to sadly watch on as the whole of Blackpool went completely crazy.

Now hours later, sitting quietly in the almost deserted service station, we wondered, if, given that it had not been possible to recommence the game with a kick off, an event that officially acknowledges that either a goal has been scored or a half is about to commence, whether or not their 'equaliser' actually stood. If it had been 'scored' by us, then we harboured few doubts about the authorities' eventual take on this situation, but as it had been in their favour, we knew straightaway how things would stand.

It was absolutely gutting to have been so close to coming home with all three points. What a difference that would have made to our fight against relegation. But, on the way up we had all craved the single point that we were now returning to Essex with. So, whilst feeling disappointed and that we had been totally robbed, as

we undoubtedly had been, there was still some cause for optimism. Our team had been far more solid with Lennon and Kiernan back in the side. Hyam too had looked the business and, although the presence of Humphries upfront will undoubtedly be sorely missed, Kelman had made more than enough of a nuisance of himself to look a useful stand-in.

Ten games to go then and at least as many more points required if we are to secure a League 1 berth for next season. Following the Barnsley debacle, one had to wonder where even one point was going to come from. But now, after this heartening display, possibilities are beginning to re-emerge. Accordingly all hope should not yet be lost, especially as the remedy is very much still in our own hands.

Scunthorpe, the name of our next opponents, has never been a happy hunting ground for us. Points gained there being even rarer than the sight of Rodney giving it a high five after experiencing a success with his betting system. But who knows? There is certainly a degree of fighting spirit within our camp, you could see that clearly expressed in the despairing faces of our players as that 100 minute goal went in, so anything might still happen. Doubt though very much that we will ever get a decent referee!!

Come on you Blues!!