



Monday 30<sup>th</sup> August 2021



**Wealdstone 0 - Southend 0**



Roast swan pate, caviar and essence of smoked trout all slammed together between two wafer thin slices of bread and there you have it, Uncle Albert's home prepared sustenance for the day. He had hoped that a sip or two of chilled Chardonnay would have completed his early lunch but, unable to procure the right type of ice (Found only inside troll caves deep inside Scandinavia and exported within casks made out of Yeti hide, it is currently in short supply due to the shortage of HGV drivers) he decided to give it a miss. In cold reality, it was a slab of raw ham, some stale bread and a bottle of water. But hey everyone's entitled to an imagination, and if Albert had to address the consequences of his lack of skill inside the kitchen by Extreme Dreaming, well at least it kept him quiet. Well sort of!

In fact, it was quite a culinary journey to the other side of the M25 for the occupants of Thunderbird II as, whilst our hallucinogenic O.A.G was busily employed smacking his lips, Mike was receiving detailed instructions about the best way to prepare scrambled eggs courtesy of the luggage compartment. Apparently, it involves a lot of stirring. Something that comes rather naturally to the TBirds!

Arriving in the backstreets of downtown Ruislip, and after witnessing a local perform an eight point turn in order to back his car into his driveway after just exiting from it, we received instructions from a friendly steward as to where we might park in return for parting with three coins of the realm. It turned out to be in a playing field immediately adjacent to what, at first sight, was just a pile of old, and extremely rusty, containers. They were all piled haphazardly on top of one another and a couple even sprouted antlers with lightbulbs acting as adornments.

Nearby, but still at enough of a distance to set Albert grumbling, another group of stewards were setting up home inside a nest made out from what appeared to be some water damaged tables. They weren't that pleased to see us, and responded to our enquiries concerning the exact location of the ground with just shrugs and grunts. Where's Trigs when you need him!

So, lacking our usual form of detriment to indifferent stewarding, we were left to investigate for ourselves and eventually, hidden behind some blackberry bushes and a pile of old junk, we caught a glimpse of a stand. Well there were two actually. The area behind one of the goalmouths being made up of a pair of unequally sized areas. Both were covered, but only one, the biggest, taking up as it did two thirds of the available area contained seating. The other was just terracing. To say that they complimented each other would be rather akin to pairing up Marlene and Pavarotti as an act at a concert. The ground was obviously suffering from being developed upon a very piecemeal basis with hardly any regard at all being paid to aesthetics.

So, the 'stadium' itself had finally been located, but just where were the turnstiles?

As the queue of arriving Southend supporters had begun to build up, finding out how we might be able to enter the ground had become a sort of holy-grail. The stewards had obviously, (At least one hoped that they had although they were still declining to say), set up their stall not far from the styles, but, apart from the rusty and decrepit looking containers, nothing else was in sight. Puzzling!

We were just about to give up looking when someone with an authoritative air turned up with a set of keys dangling from their wrist. Approaching one of the containers, he selected two of the keys and after surreptitiously checking that no one was close enough to get a clear view of what he was about to do, he

carefully unlocked one of them and pulled open its doors. All agog at what might be inside the thing, (It was just about big enough for Denzil and his scooter board to be able to perform a 360 within), we were somewhat startled to realise that the container had all the time been hiding the turnstiles!

This non-league experience was indeed turning out to be quite an adventure. One that just kept on giving as we entered the ground. By now, Grandad who, as at King's Lynn, had travelled up on one of the supporter's coaches, was desperate for internal relief. Covid restrictions having meant that the facilities aboard the coach were unavailable. Indeed, he had been hopping about on one leg for so long whilst waiting for the ground to open that the sole of one his trainers had parted company from the rest of the shoe. This meant that he was under a considerable handicap as he and Marlene, who had a similar type of problem, raced for the loos. Fortunately for him, whilst the Ladies only boasted a single seat and a rather suspect lock, the men's catered for much larger parties. Providing that is they didn't consist of more than three!

Mike, his mind much more focused upon filling his stomach rather than emptying it, especially after Albert's rendering of his fantasy menu, was equally taken aback at the sight of a refreshment bar that although apparently open for business totally lacked anything resembling food.

Even though a long queue of away supporters had been forming for well over an hour outside the ground, no one had apparently had the foresight to turn on the gas supply to the small catering caravan (A rival to Rodney's holiday let down in Dorset but absent the health and safety issues). As a result, whilst the kettles were just starting to boil, any sightings of a burger accompanied or not by cheese, was still booked as a future event that was at least half an hour away.

Mike therefore settled for just a cup of weak coffee and what was surely the tiniest crunchie bar in creation. This, alongside a cup of coffee for Albert that was accompanied by another similarly minimalist chocolate bar, cost him £6.00. Shades of Dartford though accompanied Marlene's very similar purchases as somehow, she procured them for just £3.00. Boycie did though have the grace to look a mite embarrassed before he gulped down all evidence of his wife's increasingly blatant larceny.

Now that we were inside the ground, we could see that it was little more than a hodgepodge of wooden sheds and park style changing rooms. But at least the grass upon its sloping and slightly lopsided pitch had been cut sometime within the last six months. Therefore, compared to our own at Roots Hall, it was a month-old beard, against Kings Lynn's, it was as clean shaven as a choirboy.

Having totally sold out of our allocation of tickets, we completely filled out one end of the ground. Bemused locals making up a respectable looking crowd around the edges of the rest of the pitch. They had obviously only come to see the 'Sarfend' though as not a peep was coming out of them. In direct contrast, the roar coming out from the away stand was Iron Maiden, Deep Purple and Motorhead all rolled into one. Even though 'Drummer Boy', much to Grandad's expressed grief, was absent, the amount of sound we were generating would have seen any airport immediately closed down on the grounds of noise pollution!

The pop festival where Denzil was once again embarrassing his daughters by daddy bopping was a mere tea party in comparison to what was going off here. Neither for that matter, was there anyone who was smeared in hand lotion or smelling suspiciously of exotic herbs. Instead we were roaring our heads off to greet our hero's just as if they were taking to the pitch at Wembley for the F.A cup final rather than simply treading the turf at Grosvenor Vale.

That said we still could not drown out the voice of the stadium announcer who was to be the bane of our lives for most of the afternoon. In tones that made Lurch of the Munster's sound positively upbeat, he droned on and on. Extending every announcement to the maximum extent possible, his voice so boring that it could have dug the Elizabeth extension line all by itself, it didn't seem to matter whether he was reporting the teams or simply, and repeatedly, detailing the locations of the refreshment bars (There were only two, one at each end of the ground) he just would not shut up. In the end it was so beyond mental torture that even Marlene was heard to complain of unfair competition. He had a loudspeaker whilst she only had her natural talent!

The first twenty or so minutes of the game nevertheless were a pleasure. It was quickly becoming obvious that Wealdstone, unlike our previous two opponents in this league of thugs, did not lean towards the physical side of the game. Instead, they seemed to prefer to dive at any opportunity (Their close proximity to Wembley where so many such 'feats' get well rewarded might have had an influence) but with a referee who seemed fully prepared to treat their scenes from 'Casualty' as exactly what they were, this did not appear to be a problem.

Accordingly we were soon sweeping them aside with swift, accurate, passing moves, initiating attacks down each of their flanks. During this exciting period of play we hit the bar twice and also brought the best out of their keeper on a couple of other occasions too. Indeed, so clearly were we on top that Arnold in goal could have wandered off and joined Denzil for a spot of shape cutting without anybody noticing.

But then Nemesis in the form of a dysfunctional and numerically challenged linesman took over. For some completely unknown reason (The home fans behind him possibly?) he suddenly began to decide that we were offside every time we stepped into their half. It went way beyond being ridiculous, but it still nevertheless had the effect of breaking up our previously smooth and fluid passing moves. Players now had to hesitate before releasing the ball lest the flag got raised, which it invariably did anyway!

Southgate, or indeed any international manager, would have been over the moon had their team evidenced such continuously cohesive defensive play. But we were playing Wealdstone, a side to yet even gain a point in the National League. The statistics just didn't hold up. But the linesman's flag still had the effect of stopping us from playing.

He therefore came under the spotlight, a situation the referee just couldn't endure. So, he too started awarding imaginary free kicks all over the pitch. Even worse he was booking our players for fouls that simply never occurred. His malice against us didn't end there either. Each and every time the ball went off behind our goal, so he awarded them a corner. Our closest player might have been a post code away from the balls path, but still, despite all of our protests, the corner would stand.

Clearly then we are not just playing against other teams in this division but also the officials. It's accepted that they might, on occasion, be having an off day. But then surely both teams would suffer from poor decisions fairly equally. However this was so one sided that the flat earth society would just have thrown their hands up in the air and gone home. It's not just been this one set of goons either, as creatures from the black stuff have been far too prominent a feature in all of our three fixtures so far.

Football's rule book, whilst not an absorbing read, isn't a particularly long one either. There are only 17 rules after all, and even Albert can remember one of them (It changes, but he still boasts about it all the same). So why do these officials have such a tough time recalling them? Or is a conspiracy theory way beyond the bounds of imagination?

Nothing apparently was though as far as this ref was concerned. He just continued on awarding totally fictional free-kicks against us until it became almost as monotonous as the number of announcement's that were being made. No idea what the final stats looked like but would not be at all surprised if they were awarded at least three times the amount of fouls that we were.

What was beyond any doubt at all however, was the fact that an absorbing and enjoyable game had been turned into a total farce. Worse, our hosts time on the ball had substantially increased, even if it was thanks only to the match officials. Accordingly, they were beginning to think that they might actually get something out of the game. And, with free-kicks being awarded all around our area because we were being deemed guilty of kicking the ball, breathing or just wearing a white shirt, they could hardly be blamed. Especially as the ref once even went up to head the ball for them at one point, just catching himself in time (Honest Injun) and if he could have given them a penalty, then he most certainly would have.

However, with John White seemingly an ever present at every moment of crisis, such an opportunity was never likely to arise. Marshalling his forces, all the time swearing blue thunder at the referee's underhand tactics, he organised things such that a despairing / risky tackle was never required inside our area. Just as well too, as a yellow card was now being waved every time we won the ball!

Our manager later bemoaned that at least one of his players was pulling out of tackles lest a second card saw him being sent off. But, given this refs behaviour that was probably only prudent. By simple deduction, everyone knew that he was referring to Ferguson who even at the best of times can hardly be described as being robust in the tackle.

Instead, rather like Denzil wandering around inside Bodyshop, he prefers to delicately extend a hesitant limb in the general direction of something he finds interesting rather than just manfully going for it. But his manager did have a point, especially as such hesitancy meant that our already tenuous, ( Cheers ref!) grip on midfield was quickly being dissipated in favour of the home team. Browns decision to once again tether the influential Bridge to playing out wide for the second half, only exacerbating the situation even further.

Thus, a game that we should have won and comfortably, ended up a goalless draw. The home fans celebrated, we booed. Two points had been lost, not to a superior or an even anywhere near equal team, but rather more thanks to the officials. We had been well on top until they had decided to intervene. If their decisions had been anywhere near marginal, then to a degree (Ok, not more than 1%, 2 at the most) that could have been accepted. But they were not. Instead, they stretched the realms of the totally impossible to the point where Marlen's vocal cords were those of an angel's and Albert's war experiences had been confined to barracks!

However, we are what we are. A non-league side playing non-league football. Rather un-expectantly though, that has also meant encountering officials who are so sub-standard that barnacles are growing on them. Coming to terms with the physicality of this league is already proving to be a challenge. A far greater one though looks like being how to counter the attacks of the referee and his henchmen.

Both the players and club have had their lips hermetically sealed by authorities who, providing their seat at a final is assured, don't give a damn. Whilst the supporters are brusquely ignored by these very same people should they dare to submit a letter that doesn't shower perfume upon either them or their representatives. So, what do we do?

That so few clubs regain their former league status during the course of their maiden season in the National League is no surprise given the adverse conditions that they have to face. Obviously, it is something that only pot loads of money or seasons of such experiences can address. We have neither. This is partly thanks to Ron awarding so many costs to the courts rather than paying our tax bills upon time and also to his many mistakes with regard to managerial appointments.

Our squad, after just a handful of games, has already got so depleted that once again the infant's classroom has had to be raided in order to provide a bench. Albert only had to set fire to his clothing five times before he finally learnt that playing with matches wasn't such a cool idea. Ron though appears to like risking our very existence as a club. Particularity with regard to restricting the number of players on our books to the barest minimum.

As bad as the standard of referring so evidently is in this division, the size, and composition, of our squad may ultimately prove to be the most damaging. The only good news being that there are no transfer window inhibitions for Blues to worry about. We can sign players at almost any point in the season. The big questions then are one, will Ron actually permit that to happen and two, will Brown make the right signings!

The answers could very well be the difference between us having to eat humble pie or getting to sample oysters that have been lightly grilled over candlelight before being introduced to a sauce made out of peacock's eggs (League football was like that, wasn't it?)

Come on You Blues!!