



Saturday 11th December 2021



Notts County 4 - Southend 1



Zeus hesitated before finally stopping and retracing his steps. He had just passed the 'Sour Grapes' and the smell of Ambrosia was almost overpowering. Against his better judgement he had reluctantly consented to a tavern being opened up inside the palace that lay atop of Mt Olympus. Like every other god, he had no objection to fine wines and food, but there was something about Alberto, the slave who had somehow gained the trust of Dionysus and so too the keys to the wine cellar, that made him feel uneasy.

Purportedly the result of a brief liaison between Hephaestus and Tyche, Alberto's odd habits had been the subject of many a tale. But regardless, there he now was, crouching behind the bar bearing his usual servile, almost insane, grin whilst, spawled all around a nearby table, some drunken minor gods roared with laughter over some game they were playing.

Zeus shook his head in disgust. Gambling, of one sort or another, was not encouraged but it was what he had come to expect from those who offered their patronage to the 'Grape's and were willing to suffer the attentions of its dubious barman. The game being played now though was unfamiliar to him and so his curiosity had been aroused. Alberto, initially alarmed that they were about to be raided, put back down the small hammer he had hidden away for just such emergencies and drew back from striking the gong that would have alerted his cliental.

The senior gods didn't often visit one of his little ventures, he had similar debauched premises spaced all around the city which lay a few miles away at the foot of the mountain, but something told him that Zeus wasn't about to bring this one crashing down. Well, at least not this afternoon. Instead, the god was closely examining the lid of a cardboard box which had been discarded upon the straw laden floor close to where the game was being so raucously played. It bore the legend 'Table Football'.

Thunderbird II glinted in the sunshine as she banked over Tracy Island. One of her favourite routings, first the M25 and then the M1, lay ahead and she was eager to get started. So apparently were the luggage who were to be seen stumbling out of the terminal building in an order known to science as completely random. Leading them was Denzil who was holding a map upside down and wondering why the route to the freight loading area was proving to be so much of a challenge. Following directly behind him was Granddad whilst Boycie, well aware of the problems that could arise whenever our navigator was armed with a drawing, ploughed his own path.

Strapping them in securely took some time as Denzil had first to set up his office just so. Copy of the Sun there, bottle of water over there, flask of perfume here and, finally, the textbook 'Come on Pompey, Pompey come on' that he was studying with some intensity ahead of his house move down to Portsmouth in the New Year. Some of what was written inside the comic worried him. Having to bear his chest and sport a tattoo of a sinking boat was something that he was fairly relaxed about. No what concerned him, was the fact that he was also expected to ring a bell. With these coiffured hands!

The airports weather office had forecast bands of heavy rain ahead of the flight. Strong, possibly gale force, winds could also be expected. Accordingly, a section of the hold behind where the livestock had just been safely stowed, had been filled to the brim with warm, protective, clothing. Mike soon began to wish that it also boasted some earmuffs as his freight began to baa on about Boris, Covid and just how big a bell did it have to be.

About 50 minutes into the flight we got lost. Now the fact that we would probably lose our bearings at some point had already been well documented inside TBII's risk log. With Denzil onboard, his beak now buried deep inside 'Diedre's' latest tales of naughtiness instead of keeping track of where North was, such a happening was not only expected, but almost bound to occur. What though made this particular experience stand out from the norm was the sad fact that all four aboard had an equal part in the blame.

Denzil firstly for not providing sufficient navigational information. Then Mike, for not only listening, but also acting upon the stern advice that was subsequently thrust at him by the less than dynamic backseat duo as to what turning off the roundabout he needed to take in order to recover the situation. Especially given that, deep down, 'Smoke Me A Kipper' was simply screaming out 'No'. The result being that TBII was on a heading of South rather than North. Animals have no sense of direction and Mike knew this. So, despite all Boycies and Grandads mewing and barking, he really should have ignored them. But have you ever tried tuning out the Thunderbirds when they are in full spate?

A chastening fifteen so minutes later, we were back on track and from then on, our journey into the Northern regions went fairly smoothly. Arriving in Nottingham in good time, we soon spotted a car park and five minutes later we were standing around sipping hot drinks inside the ground. 'Sipping' being the operative word.

Bovril is a strange drink. Being essentially watered down cow, is it ever drunk anywhere other than at a football ground? Especially when, as in this case, it was in the form of volcanic lava. Boycie had stirred his sample with a wooden fork but Mike, unthinkingly, had opted to employ a plastic spoon instead. Realizing his mistake only when it had been drawn back out of the sizzling pot and found to be contorted out of all shape by its furnace like experience.

The national League suffers from an identity problem. Inside the Football league there is a sort of recognisable pecking order with regard to stadia, Premiership fans being cossetted inside fortresses of malformed steel, Championship supporters by walls of concrete and followers of league 1 and 2 clubs by grounds that all follow a similar sort of architectural formula. However, no such tidy pattern exists within this league!

At Wealdstone we struggled to find the turnstiles which turned out to be hidden away, out of sight, inside some rusting containers. At Boreham Wood, the pitch was fantastic, but the stands strictly utilitarian and then we come to a club like Notts County where the majesty of their stadium belies their humble non-league position.

Massive, tall stands tower over each of the four sides of the pitch and only the corner flags are open to the elements. Equally the pitch, and everything else about the place, simply shouts out class. Paying a visit to a club in this division is truly an Alice through the Looking Glass experience.

Our seats, surrounded by around 900 other souls who were having an away day from civilisation, were alongside the pitch, level with one of the penalty areas. Each chair was well supported by a generous expanse of surrounding concrete and so Mike, wishing to enjoy his drink sometime within the next fortnight, wondered if putting it down such that the cup (Also plastic but showing no signs of melting. Curious) might cool down once it had been introduced to a cold surface. Around an hour later it still scalded lips but at least its ambitions to become another Vesuvius had been put aside.

Somewhere at a somewhat higher altitude and with a better view (Even than watching Blues?) a boxes lid was being lifted and its contents spilled out upon a marble table. Grapes, subjected to the tread of many feet and allowed to sour for a number of months (It would have been days if Alberto had had his way but the gods frowned upon such things) were being supped by the jug and much merriment was ensuing. The gods were obviously anticipating a good game ahead. We though had rather more mixed feelings.

Four days earlier we had witnessed an absolute disaster of a game at Roots Hall. A precious point had somehow been salvaged but that was about the only plus point resulting from the evening's 'entertainment'.

We had simply not shown up, and if similarly blue shirted ghosts were going to haunt the Notts County pitch today, then the sort of thrashing that only Rodney dreams about, was surely going to befall us. Indeed, Grandad had already submitted a 4 – 0 forecast to the Thunderbirds score prediction competition. But then he ever always is an optimist where Southend are concerned.

Our representative from the South East corner of Hundred Acre Wood though was growling away, mumbling about scores that were more akin to a defeat at a cricket ground than a game in which a rather larger leather ball featured. Unlike Mike though, Boycie had not put down his cup. So just possibly it was his charred hands that were causing him to transmit so many distress signals.

A pair of dice got thrown and a shout of glee echoed around the confines of the 'Sour Grapes' as the result got announced.

With our loanee Polish centre back absent (He was having an injury tended to in Sheffield by his home club), our defence had a rather a 'Last remaining Christmas tree' look about it. From a distance, it appeared to be almost as good as those that had been sold ahead of it. But, held up to the clear light of day, it did not really bear up to any close scrutiny. The very sort of examination that our hosts would surely be subjecting it to for at least 90 minutes today!

A sullen growl went round the table as the results of the next dice throw got seen.

However, in midfield, Brunt had, at long last, been allocated to his proper position, and so was being charged with directing play from the middle, rather than the outsides, of it. Alongside him was no lazy layabout either, but instead a young, enthusiastic player going by the name of Gard whilst Clifford had also made a welcome return to the side following a long layoff due to injury. This allowed the very talented Ralph to move forward from a defensive position. A step that added further strength to our midfield. All hopeful stuff. But for just how long would the returning players legs last for? Young, their owners might well be, but as they also lacked any real pitch time ... It was all a bit of a dice throw really.

The opening exchanges of the match saw our hosts spring a couple of tentative attacks down our flanks, only to be fairly comfortably thwarted. Something that gave us an opportunity to also probe forwards, but without any real venom or thrust. It wasn't a game of chess but then neither was it one of Risk either. Neither side was having a monopoly on play so it was hard for either set of supporters, the silent home fans or the extremely vocal away, to have much of a Cluedo about what was actually going on.

Stools got thrown aside and a full-blown fight seemed to be imminent as two dice, each bearing just a single spot, got thrown down. Alberto took advantage of the uproar to slip away unnoticed down into the cellar where he urged the slaves to pull their socks down and so get treading. If what had just happened, was ever to reoccur, then he needed to be ready and have more than just two barrels of wine available to cool things down

A tidy cross by Ralph into their box had been neatly trapped by Murphy before being steered into the path of Dalby who had then steered it home into the back of the net. The away stand simply erupting as so did the away bench. The sleepy, dozy, blues of Tuesday night had been blown away and in, their place, were a team that could play football like this. Talk about Jekyll and Hyde!

Alas though just 10 minutes of the ninety had passed and so there was still a very long way to go. Someone, with utterly no desire for even a hint of optimism to get out of hand, was already introducing teeth to nail whilst Grandad was peering around with a glint of triumph in his eyes. Three more like that and we'll see then who's extracting the urine out of whom!

At Chesterfield we had conceded three quick goals after taking an early lead. However, at Altringham we had instead opted to add to our account before allowing the opposition to reply. Notts County were now huffing and puffing around our area with some urgency. So the question was, is our house built of bricks or simply straw?

Things had calmed down a little by the time Alberto dared show his head again but the tension in the room was still palpable. Each throw of the dice drawing hissed breaths and snarls of disappointment. Whilst one of the dice was evidently being fairly consistent in performing as required, the other wasn't. And each time that it failed to behave, so it met with much expressed disfavour.

Our hosts, cheered on by absolutely no one, were now pressing hard, but each time, seemingly at the very last possible moment, we somehow managed to steal the ball off them. On too many occasions though hesitant, almost suicidal, defensive play was resulting in the ball being fed straight back to them, it seemed as if only a fall of a dice was saving us. The floor underneath our seats was becoming covered in shards of talon. The air was pretty blue too!

Wembley was still multiple generations away but the roar that swept around the tavern as the dice finally fell in the manner required of them, would have graced any cup final goal. God was hugging god, gods were weeping, gods were cheering and Alberto, well Alberto was having more than a crafty swig whilst everyone's attention was elsewhere.

As in the case of Denzil's maffs, Blues errors were beginning to compound, and the inevitable result of our uncertain defending finally caught up with us. County scoring their equalising goal in the 31st minute. It came just seconds after our inane supporters had finished singing that awful Scottish anthem. The number of goals that we have conceded after they have performed that appalling dirge, more usually sung only by kilt bearing heathens carving out some sort of existence upon bumpy ground many, many miles to our North, is beyond statistical happenstance. Indeed, there is nothing at all 'happy' about it and the sooner we stop yelping it out, the better!

Ivory hunters are the bane of the African plains. However, it's uncertain just how the value of fingernail clippings measures up against an average elephant or rhino's tusk. But even so, there must have been a small fortune's worth steadily building up underneath Eeyore's chair.

Whoops of joy and screams of excitement bounced off the pubs walls as a double five got thrown. Only one god, who had been surreptitiously trying to smuggle a vat of wine away, was not initially caught up in the outburst of singing. But when the scowling Alberto was forced to join in, he soon caught up.

Five minutes into the second half and things got even worse! A dangerous, low, cross into the box being met by equally brave goalkeeping, as Arnold dived down onto the ball. Unfortunately, and by sheer accident (It must have been one, because the player concerned had only made three similar 'mistakes' in the first half according to the ref!) a boot, travelling at Mach 5, struck him directly in the head as he caught hold of the ball.

Had CCTV caught evidence of the incident outside in the street, then Arnold's assailant would have undoubtedly been looking at a life's sentence as a season ticket holder at the JobServe community stadium or whatever Colpoo's tip is called nowadays. As it was though, serenaded by a braying home crowd, the player concerned was being comforted by an official who was more worried that a player who had blood smeared all over his boots might require some treatment than his victim. Later it turned out that Arnold had been severely concussed but, certainly as far as the ref was concerned, he was just play acting and so got ignored. Just where do they get these jokers from?

Knowing only too well the true situation, County now increased their pressure upon our goal. We were occasionally able to break out but, with legs in midfield visibly tiring, we were steadily conceding territory. One more dodgy throw of the dice, and we we're done for!

Such a dubious dice throw occurred in the 64th minute. Just ten minutes or so after Arnold had first began counting stars. But even had he not had his head up in the clouds, it was doubtful that he would have been able to prevent the goal. Instead credit must go to County who displayed some neat, interchanging, play before scoring a superbly executed goal.

In a way the worst had now happened, or so we all thought, and the steady flow of earthbound nail clippings could come to a halt. Grandad's demeanour had also undergone a subtle change. His strict now having more of a hang dog, here we go again, look than a challenging one. But, positive to the end, he was beginning to wonder if he lied, and so addressed his email as coming from Rodney, (Someone whose appeals are always treated sympathetically) then Denzil (Someone has to manage the prediction league and his appointment was made on a slow day) might allow him to change his score prediction, even at this late stage of the game.

Looks of sheer disbelief were now being exchanged between the drunken gods. Even in their cups, they could barely believe what their eyes were telling them, Then, tables, benches, stools and even the calendar with the strategically positioned packets of peanuts that barely concealed a goddesses assets got torn from its hallowed position as they began celebrating. It soon became the New Year's party to end all New Year's parties.

Arnold just couldn't take any more punishment. Shoved and pushed at every opportunity, his head spinning like a compass surrounded by magnets, he was finally forced to signal to the bench that he had had enough after just conceding our third goal. The ball had been hit straight at him, but he had barely seen it.

Only sheer guts and bravery had kept him on the pitch but, when the dice were so loaded against you, what could you do. And so the diminutive Demitriou took his place between the sticks. Yells of derision from the home fans meeting his appearance as he put on his gloves. Given that at least three of their forwards had been wearing cashmere hand coverings straight from kick-off, that was a bit rich. But they, just like their team, could now smell blood in the water and dark northern instincts, never far from the surface, had taken hold.

During the first half, and especially during the period that they had been behind, not a peep had been heard from them. But now they were giving it all that and then some. To be fair though, our silent, almost totally comatose, East Stand could have learnt a lot from them because they knew just how to exert the authority of their voices over the officials.

For example, in the final minutes of the opening 45, one of their players had committed a really late tackle. Most referee's, even at this level of incompetence, would have issued a straight red. But the player only received a yellow. Yet the reception that the ref met as a consequence when he left the pitch for the break, was awesome in terms of both its ferocity and earthly expressed wrath. In similar circumstances our East Standers would have been far more interested in ensuring that the edges around their prawn sandwiches were perfectly straight and that the tea bags had been dipped properly!

In the past, Ron has sponsored away travel to games. He might do well to consider doing so again. Just so that the indigenous population of the East Stand can receive an education in official control. Crowds at most grounds that we visit are fully up to speed on the subject already. Giving the match officials a hard time throughout the game and thus having an influence upon their decision making. Your average East Stander, even armed with a Zimmer frame and a letter from Nanny, currently has as much effect upon a linesman flag as a flatulent gnat. But, given the right training (Plus probably some extra sugar just to get their blood moving) they might, just might, get us the odd throw in decision. Worth a try Ron?

A shot, fired from a cannon of a foot, flew straight towards the top corner of our net. The scoreboard was already signalling their 4th goal of the afternoon, but then, somehow, Demi stretched his body just enough to steer the ball away for a corner. Blimey! How on earth did he do that?

As cries of "Southend, Southend's number 1" resounded around the ground, the corner came over. Demi couldn't even be seen amongst the bundle of bodies competing for the ball. But once again a small hand popped up just enough to clear the ball to safety. Maher's decision not to have a reserve keeper on the pitch was a bold one. But perhaps, just possibly, maybe, he knew something about Demetriou's goalkeeping ability that we didn't.

It couldn't last of course. But even so, it still took another well taken headed goal, (Even if there was a question of offside about it) to beat him in the 89th minute. It gave the score line the appearance that we had so feared on the journey up. But, and in all truth, it was an unrealistic one, and one that we didn't deserve.

That's not to say that we are not a poor team. We are. Equally we are not a team that will stay up comfortably this term. Our future in that regard hanging in so many ways upon an HMRC official's decision and any subsequent lifting of our transfer embargo. That said, it's very doubtful that this set of Blues players could have performed any better, and each one of them had certainly given their all. That is why they did not merit a 4 -1 defeat. Notts County were undoubtedly the better team, but not by three goals.

Cries of 'No, that's going too far' and 'You can't do that' competed with loud, rowdy, laughter as the gods collapsed on the floor, tears of mirth steaming from their eyes.

Despite being three goals behind, our desire to get forward remained unabated. Accordingly, as the game entered injury time, we found ourselves on the edge of their box. A shot then got fired in from the wing, the ball rebounding out to the edge of the area where a blue boot met it, driving the ball forwards and so into the back of the net.

4-2 and the scenes in the away stand were once more unbelievable. Sure, we were still going to lose, but at least we weren't going down without a fight. Come on you Blues!!

Our players celebrated the goal quickly, realising that they still had at least two more to score and that there were just a few minutes left in the game. So, along with the home team, they made their way back up-field, ready for the game to restart. That is save for two County defenders who were waving their hands above their heads like Boris at a Christmas party. Sorry, that's to say a Christmas business meeting that, although complete with drinks, party hats, music and food, was most definitely not a party.

Now about 30 seconds had passed by this point and apart from these two idiots, everyone, including the referee, was ready for the match to kick off again. But then the linesman's flag slowly began to rise. It didn't go up proudly. Neither was it raised with any of a linesman usual enthusiasm for spoiling someone's afternoon. Instead, it rose gradually, almost apologetically, just as if it was not really meant to be taken seriously.

Three sixes had just been thrown. Which, given that only two dice had up until this point, been in play, meant that something deeply suspicious had therefore just occurred. The Gods each looked at each other accusingly. before once more grinning broadly and throwing themselves back onto the floor, laughing even more uncontrollably.

It was truly unbelievable. The ball had been struck by a player outside a crowded box and had not been touched or otherwise interfered with by anyone else. Yet the goal was being disallowed for offside. A decision only reached by the linesman some 30 seconds or more after the ball had hit the back of the net.

It's not at all uncommon for defender's arms to go up. It occurs after almost every goal in fact; silent pleas for the lineman to save them from embarrassment. Accordingly, the arms are raised more in hope than any expectation. It's almost an instinctive response upon their part.

Equally so, and do please pay attention at this point East Stand, the wild claims issuing from the crowd directly behind the linesman were obviously taking their toll upon an individual who shouldn't have been let out on his own. Especially with dodgy eyesight like that.

Nevertheless, the spineless amoeba did manage to withstand the pressure for almost half a minute before finally given up. The referee, as his senior manager, should have at least offered his support. He should also have made sure that the linesman was absolutely sure, having so obviously changed his mind after a very long period of deliberation or was it crowd persuasion?

But neither of these two things happened. So, despite the incredibly long delay, VAR eat your heart out, the extremely dubious, and drawn out, decision stood. The score remaining one that sadly read 4 – 1.

Zeus shrugged his shoulders. Sure, he could, make that should, have intervened. But it was only a game. Few would remember it with 100% accuracy and absolutely no bias at all this time tomorrow, so why worry? Alberto silently watched him leave, dropping the glass that he had been pretending to polish onto the floor as the god departed. 'Illegitimi non carborundum' was written upon the robe that he found tucked away in one of the cellars cupboards. He had no idea at all what it meant, but somehow he felt it really reflected just what he was feeling about the gods, right now!

Come on you Blues!!