



Saturday 29th January 2022



Dover 0 - Southend 1



“Because it’s there!” (Sir Edmund Hillary), “Veni Vidi Vici” (Julius Caesar), “Blimey” (Mike)

We were standing at the foot of a mountain path, so steep, that even the goats were wearing crampons. To our immediate right, deep clefts plummeted straight down towards in a hollow within which a number of tiny men were throwing what appeared to be an egg to each other. A stiff breeze threatened to help us to join them, so, retreating as far back from the edge as we could, we instead directed our attention, and eyes, upwards towards the geological anomalies peak. Shrouded in clouds it not only looked uninviting, but it was also very, very, far away.

The path wound its wandering way up it, clinging desperately to its side with every twist and turn. With stands of trees, forlorn scarecrows stripped of their summer plumage, blocking our view on one side we were thus left with an unhappy choice of either looking directly up or down. Both were equally uninviting.

Contemplating only ever attending a football match, we had neglected to bring along any ropes. So too any form of breathing apparatus. A compass though was not going to be missed as, despite our hopeful (Ok desperate) attempts to find another, much flatter, route up to Dover Athletic ground, there was only one option. Which was to start our ascent.

Back in 1945, Hillary and his mate were the only tourists wandering around Everest taking selfies. Visit it today though, and endless queues of climber’s cling to its sides; each awaiting their turn to take another step. So it was upon this route too, for despite the speed of Blues descent unto the lower leagues, our away, and indeed home, support has remained amazing. Almost 2,000 of the loyal were upon this Alp with us and, to an amused observer, it might well have seemed as if a steam train was puffing its way heavenwards given the sight of so much breath escaping from exhausted lungs and the amount of noise being generated by all our wheezing and coughing.

The terrain might have been daunting (It was!) but eventually, and to much expressed relief, the summit came into view. Had it been worth the climb? Only if you are Trigger. Because, other than a small group of stewards and an expanse of steel sheeting, there was nothing to be seen. No friendly pub sign, no inviting tourist shop and no open turnstiles. Boycies plumbing had not enjoyed the climb and was now alerting him to this fact with some urgency. Marlene too was experiencing similar internal pressures. However Trigger was happily making the most of this opportunity, and so was busily noting down the stewards badge numbers inside his spotters book, leaving Mike to find out just how long we were going to have to wait.

No one appeared to be sure. The stewards, nervous and upset by Trigger antics, would only provide approximate answers. A situation that left us standing around, some hopping on one foot and clutching unmentionable parts, for some time. Not at all an edifying experience. Accordingly, we all were somewhat pleased when eventually an elderly grandmotherly type figure appeared. She was clutching a gigantic iron key, the sort that provides access to castles and, in Albert’s case, dungeons too. It dangled from one hand whilst she importantly waved several papers around in front of the stewards who by now were only to eager to be accosted by anybody other than our pet dormouse.

Some creaking noises were then heard before, after a brief hesitation and some far from matronly observations, also the kick of a firm boot. The turnstiles were finally open for business and the Thunderbirds were the first into the ground. The Greens had urgent business to attend to, but Mike and Trigs made straight

for the tea bar whose prices put other clubs to shame. Beverages were costed upon the basis of someone purchasing a teaspoon of coffee rather than a jar, and the price of burgers reflected those found upon a supermarkets shelves rather than deep down inside a gold mine. Unsurprisingly a long queue of eager customers soon formed.

The ground itself is hard to describe. Behind each of the goals was traditional terracing but alongside each edge of the pitch it was a very different story. Upon one side, and taking up probably half of the pitch, was something that appeared to be an old cricket pavilion, complete with balcony and deckchairs. Alongside it was something equally as odd, a hastily built shack complete with seating. It looked so uncomfortable that even Grandad, who had travelled down by supporters coach, decided that he, for once, would stand rather than reside.

Upon the opposite side of the pitch was an equally small stand that boasted around the same number of seats. Then there was a long gap filled only by the managers benches, before another building, a garage perhaps or maybe some offices, presented its unedifying rear to the pitch. Which itself was also a sorry sight, resembling more a cow pasture than a sports field. It sloped in two directions, one downwards and along its complete length, another lurching from right to left. Evidence of sprinkled sand was everywhere and the chances of the ball running true upon it were right up there with Boris resigning and Denzil finding a use for hair spray!

The noise being generated by our stand behind the goal at the bottom of the slope was astonishing. In fact you could see one of our new signings asking one of our longer serving players if "We are always like that?" and getting a very enthusiastic affirmative in response. Someone's day though was destined to come to an early end. A visitor from Southend being evicted from the ground after throwing a smoke bomb just as the lads came out for their warm up. Foolishness! Especially after having to make such a challenging ascent to get up here in the first place.

Then, as those fans who had lingered in nearby pubs and hostelrys eventually made their way into the ground, so the stand began to overfill. Stewards (Who were now going around in pairs as no one, absolutely no one, wanted to undergo an interrogation from Trigger on their own ever again), tried to shepherd our supporters into some sort of order. Eventually though they gave up the ghost and sensibly just let people stand where there would.

The Thunderbirds had firmly established their bit of territory though and by using well practised techniques, the more advanced having been taught to us by the Brothers Grimm's dad in years gone by, it was preserved intact. Others were less fortunate though and so quite a degree of crushing and pushing inevitable ensued. However, with kick off fast approaching, everything somehow got sorted allowing everybody to concentrate upon their main task. Supporting Southend United to the very hilt!

"When we were young" echoed around the ground as Blues lined up facing us for the first half. We had been a bit surprised at the inclusion of Dennis, welcome as it was. He had only just recovered from being injured and a seat on the substitutes bench must surely have been what he was expecting. As thought though, neither of our two latest new signings were starting the game. Nevertheless Powell was still one of the subs.

Blues pushed forward, and down, straight from the kick off and inside the first few minutes should have been awarded a penalty. It was one of the most blatant and obvious fouls ever. Cardwell, with the goal at his mercy, was crashed to the ground by their desperate keeper but incredibly none of the officials claimed to have seen it. The ref's view, given that he was several trillion miles away from the offence, could have been blocked but the linesman's was absolutely clear. He was as close to the scene of the crime as we were and yet saw nuffin. He's either well overdue a visit to SpecSavers or his conscience is as shallow as Boris's.

The away stand went totally berserk. Instead of being a goal up, either via Cardwell's skilful touch or a kick from the penalty spot, we were stuck upon what was obviously a very un-level pitch, and on so many terms! We had been robbed!

It rather set the tone for the rest of the game because from that point on it was all rather scruffy and, as our Polish centre back was later to tweet, a "Proper School game" with both sides chasing the ball around rather

than playing any kind of structured football. If the ball was on one side of the field then so were 20 players, if it was on the other, then twenty pairs of boots scuffed away at it and if it was down the middle Suffice to say it was pretty terrible.

To be fair to both sides, the condition of the pitch was probably the major factor in determining how the game could be played. The ball just bounced around everywhere, a drunken puppet on a string, flying first in one direction and then the other. Hack football? Yes it most probably was, and, with clear cut chances for either side being rarer than a sighting of Rodney's wallet, it was not very enjoyable.

Blues though were also guilty of only ever having one eye open. Listeners to BBC Colchester could have been forgiven for thinking that Demetriou wasn't playing, so few touches of the ball came his way. Yet he was continuously making good runs into clear air down our left flank only to see the ball always played right. He must have been extremely frustrated. Especially as all we ever did was to run into a traffic jam of home defenders whilst his nearest marker was a postcode away.

Both teams were giving their all but the end result was nevertheless more akin to a playground kick-a-bout than a cup final at Wembley. No Blue shirt was shirking, and no one was playing exactly badly. But equally, if asked, who was your Man of the match, you would struggle for a name. Perhaps the game at Aldershot, where we had played the role of attackers against siege minded defenders for so long, was also taking a toll. Both in terms of energy and also mind sets. We weren't moving the ball fast around enough and also appeared to be more interested in playing chess against them rather than all that was required which was a good hand in Snap!

Nevertheless, we did have most of the play in the first half and even though our strong presence in the air (Cardwell, had had to go off at halftime to be replaced by the far more diminutive Powel) we expected that situation to comfortably continue into second. However, Dover had other thoughts and instead it was they who had us pinned back close to our own area for the majority of the final half. They were though very ably aided and abetted by the referee who awarded them fouls seemingly upon the basis that it had been twenty seconds since he had last awarded them one, rather than any misdemeanours upon our part. At last Mike and Boycie were getting to enjoy themselves!

Our hosts had one extremely tricky forward who was happily tying our defenders up in knots. Fortunately, his finishing was about as smooth as Rodney's chat up lines, and just as successful. Rather surprisingly then, and much to our relief, he got substituted later in the game. Possibly their manager felt that they needed more height up front, but, without him, their attacks became less and less frequent.

Another one of their players of note was their number 6. If he played for you, then you would love him. But he was wearing a home shirt and thus every sneaky foul, each feigned injury and almost everything he did, got booed. Dalby must have left the field feeling like he had been mauled by a bull. Every time he got close to the player in question, so he got either rugby tackled or hauled to the ground by an arm around his neck. All, apparently, unobserved by either linesman or referee. The white cane rack in their changing room must have been overflowing!

Unexciting as the game generally was, either side could have still snatched all three points. Their 12th man was helping them to apply pressure to our area whilst fast, intelligent distribution of the ball by Arnold was enabling our forwards to have the odd foray or two around their area.

Late in the game and following one very such excursion, we got awarded a rare corner and the incoming ball was well met by Dalby's head. The packed away end rose to its feet in acclamation, only to almost immediately sink back down disappointed, as a desperate clearance off the line robbed us of a goal. However, the ball only travelled a few feet before it was met on the half volley by the boot of Husin and introduced to the back of the home net. Everything suddenly went into orbit!

The scenes taking place inside the away end were indescribable. Fans were leaping about and cheering, shouting, and yelling for all they were worth. In the distance, up at the far end of the pitch, it was equally as daft. Our wonderful lads celebrating together like mad. Up until then it had been a frustrating, boring, afternoon but now everything was brilliant and almost overwhelmingly exuberant. Smiles were everywhere,

save amongst some desperate parents who, content until now to let their small children run around and play, were trying to collect their tiny charges together in order to comfort them against all the noise and excitement that had suddenly erupted all about them.

Singing about our imminent return to the football league was possibly a trifle over optimistic but given that we have taken 13 of the 15 points that were on offer this January, forgivable. It does though highlight a new problem for King Kev and his court, one of managing expectations. Yes, it does now seem highly likely that we will avoid relegation (Phew!) but equally there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done before any halcyon day's return. Many of our fans though clearly expect them to occur tomorrow, and so this is going to be a headache for our magnificent management team to overcome.

But they are probably much happier having to deal with that sort of challenge than that of picking a team to succeed in National League South!

Come on you Blues!!