



**Monday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2022**



**Barnet 1 - Southend 3**



Thunderbird III hovered uncertainly above the verdant, beautiful countryside below her. Its crew totally bemused by the jewel in the crown which lay, not only beyond the borders of the swampland that encompasses Tracy Island International, but also their imaginations. Their eyes darted about everywhere, hungry to take in the totally breath-taking scenery that is the Tracy Island Annex.

Mike, being grounded for health reasons, was already awaiting their descent. He had a long wait as it took quite some time for those already aboard TBIII to reorganise their thoughts enough to make a landing. Eventually though they did and so, with many a regretful sigh and wistful backwards look, the third Thunderbird in the fleet headed away from the Annex and Westwards. If Heineken made scenery ...

We were not flying that far away, just a hop and a jump around the M25. However, there was a fair amount of Bank Holiday traffic around and so Marlene, our pilot, needed to keep her concentration. Something that wasn't helped by Albert almost immediately going into Trigs mode and so opening up his picnic basket.

Inside it lay the results of all his culinary skills. Two jam sandwiches, a packet of crisps and a flask of cold tea. Within his grubby paws however his piece de la resistance was being subjected to some serious gumming. Consisting of what looked like a slice of chicken roll smothered in some yellow, sticky, evil smelling, substance, it was obviously proving to be somewhat of a major undertaking to consume.

But Albert is nothing if not determined and so, bringing his sawn-off fingernails into play, he began to rip apart what he claimed was Chicken Supreme ala Mustard. This exercise continued for some time but at least it kept him relatively quiet. Something for which we were all truly thankful.

Since our last visit, Barnet have moved home. This meant that after exiting the motorway we had to twist and turn our way through a number of suburban streets, all packed with holiday traffic. Indeed, the last ten miles of our journey took longer than the forty or so that had preceded it.

Eventually though we were peering, somewhat puzzled, at a pair of barriers that blocked our means of reaching their ground. Other drivers were equally perplexed, and so turned their vehicles around to seek mooring posts elsewhere. However, we had to eject Albert, someone whose walking capability (Well in a straight line anyway) is somewhere in the region of 50 yards, as close to the ground as possible. But how did we gain access to it?

There were no signs or notices. Just these huge barriers. We could though see the stadium and its carpark in the distance, so Boycie, who was suffering from another issue related to the letter 'P', volunteered to go over and see if anyone could help.

But, just as he climbed out of TBIII, so a small van swept past us, hesitating only briefly to allow the barriers to automatically raise up and let it pass. Ahhhh we all thought!

The entertainment for the day was only just beginning though because, having parked up, we now had to find some method of paying for the privilege. Again Boycie stepped forward only to find that aiming his phone at a square bit of squiggly art produced no results whatsoever.

None of the parking meters were working. But no worries he could always pay, said a sign, at the ticket office. So off he wandered only to return sometime later, Eeyore to the core, having been informed that the ground was card only and thus did not accept cash!

Fortunately Marlene had the required bit of plastic and so, somewhat cheered up as she, and not he, would now be paying for drinks etc, he retraced his steps, returning not so chuffed as no receipt for our payment had been forthcoming. He had provided though TB III's registration details and so if a fight came to a fight later, well we could always aim Albert at them!

The cabaret routine then continued as we endeavoured to find the away turnstiles. Quite naturally these were situated as far away from the car parking area as possible. A fact that our grumbling O.A G did not appreciate at all. His language reflecting our home colours as he realised that he was required to show the slim bit of paper that purported to be a ticket to a machine, in order to gain entrance.

So there he was, waving it away at a computer screen that just stared blankly back at him. Then, noticing that there was a twin of the graffiti that was supposed to facilitate paying for a parking spot on the 'ticket', he held that up against the screen. Again, to no effect. He was starting to get annoyed, and a pot boiling Albert is not a pretty sight. Or a particularly quiet one either!

Fortunately at this point, a steward bravely entered the scene and showed our tribal elder where to put his ticket. Realising that Albert's response to that was extremely unlikely to be a polite one. or indeed practicable given the slight nature of the 'ticket', Marlene quickly stepped forward and did the necessary.

Barely though had we got him calmed back down but he spotted the food prices. A burger cost a mortgage and for the price of a plate of chips, a small holding, complete with outside lavvy, could be had!

Barnet's ground is a curious one, containing as it does only two and a half stands. One, the away end, soars above one goal but it has no mirror at the other end of the pitch, just a steep grassy bank. Another stand though, also full of seating, runs down the length of the pitch. However only half of it had been opened up for business. The end closest to us being completely vacant.

Right opposite it though was where things got interesting, or rather not. On that side of the pitch, three or four rows of seating provided a sort of paddock area that ran all down its side. But, once again, only half of it was being made available to home supporters for some reason.

Immediately behind this stood a blank high wall that looked more like the backside of a DIY store than an interior fitting for a football stadium. Still, as they hardly had any support at all, it's doubtful it made all that much difference to any of the locals.

For, apart from the packed, and very noisy, away end, the ground was almost empty. Attacking one goal, a team could be forgiven for thinking that they were playing at Wembley. Launch a punt towards the other though, and it could be just another lonely day on the training pitches.

Completing the picture was a railway line that ran behind the ground. Denzil had made use of it to join us and though it's not possible to point to any proof as such, the correlation between the trains running so empty and his passage upon them, is nevertheless somewhat suggestive.

The game started with Blues, all in white, attacking the banking at the end of the pitch that was furthest away from us, and indeed anybody else. Our hosts match plan immediately becoming obvious as sky ball after sky ball got played. A game that was far more akin to beach volleyball ensuing.

But finally, we got the ball on the ground and set Dalby free on the right wing. He sped down the line before crossing the ball into the area only to witness it being blocked by an upraised hand. The away end bellowed 'Hand ball' and the referee agreed. Only, having missed our last two attempts from the spot, just who was going to step up and take the penalty?

Harry Cardwell was the answer and, despite the goalkeeper diving the right way, he hit the ball so well that we were one up inside the first five minutes. It should have been two very shortly afterwards as a right mix up between two defenders upon the halfway line released Powell with no one between him and the goalkeeper.

As he advanced, so did two other Blues to his left. The obvious thing then to do, was to draw the keeper, before slipping the ball across to either one of them. Instead, he went for goal himself; the ball flying wide of the far post leaving all of us in utter disbelief. Even Albert was speechless!

Ten minutes later though he was sitting back up in his highchair and cheering loudly. Another cross from Dalby was headed back across goal by Clifford and there was Demitriou to slot the ball home giving us a very deserved two goal lead.

It really should then have just been a case of how many more could we score. Barnet, having conceded seven just two days before, were clearly there for the taking, but, for some reason, are collective foot came off the pedal at this point.

Our form of late, ever since the last sighting of Rodney in fact, has been poor, so possibly lack of confidence had something to do with it. But, for whatever reason, we retreated inside our shells and so allowed our hosts both time and space to restore their lost self-belief.

Not that they did much with it. Arnold once again enjoying a spell of relaxation in the sunshine as the ball rarely got anywhere near him. Full credit to him therefore when, close to halftime, Barnet got awarded an extremely generous penalty of their own.

Their player had hit the ground long before the ball or a Blues defender had got anywhere near him. Yet there was the ref pointing to the spot. Should VAR, heaven forbid, ever reach this level of the game, just how many officials could the F.A honestly say they should continue to employ given evidence such as that as video of this incident, and indeed our penalty award on Good Friday, would have provided?

'Steeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeve' though dived the right way, making a tremendous save at the cost of a corner. Our goal mouth then came under considerable pressure, all referee biased, as he awarded throw in after throw in to Barnet when clearly their players had kicked the ball off, before we could finally give Arnold his full due as the ball got cleared safely up-field.

Many will be ruing their credit cards bills following their halftime indulgencies. Boxes, once full of burger and chips, being strewn about everywhere as the two teams re-entered the pitch. Both were making half time substitutions, one for us, two for them.

Hopes though that we would repeat our early successes of the first just as quickly in the second, were quickly doused as our slip back into sleep walking mode commenced almost as soon as the game restarted. Not every one of our players was affected of course, but some nevertheless moved as if balls and chains were wrapped around their feet. Not encouraging.

Especially as Barnet were now making very determined efforts to get back into the game. Less so their supporters who were almost as sleepy as Blues! We though were still giving it full throttle, urging the lads to dig deep and so recover the poise that that they had shown much earlier in the game.

It wasn't to be though and so when our hosts did eventually score, it came as no real surprise. Other than that is, than that it had taken them so long. It has been suspected for quite a while that our players are bottle fed Horlicks at halftime, but this malaise had started long before that particular whistle. No doubt some of them will be claiming to have lead in their pencils at Easter celebrations later on. Right here, in the now though, it was most definitely in their boots!

More substitutions by both sides got made. They attacked, we resisted. However, they could see the fear in our eyes and with their own self confidence now at its fore they were running a game that earlier they hadn't even been able to dip a toe into. Ridiculous!

Five extra minutes got signalled and somehow, we still had the lead. But our grip upon it was extremely slim and so it was with a collective sigh of relief that we saw a loose ball being cleared up the pitch and running in the general direction of Dennis.

A race then ensued between him and two defenders before he emerged the victor. Clean air now lay between him and the goal some forty or fifty yards ahead. The entire away end was up on its feet urging him on towards us. Brief flashback of when Powell had been in an extremely similar situation gave rise to warning signs, but our Norwich loanee made no mistake. Slipping the ball across an empty area as the goalkeeper advanced towards him, he left Dunne to finish off the job for him.

The scenes that followed were truly amazing. Dunne vanishing under a heap of bodies, one of who's was Arnold's who had run the length of the pitch to celebrate, whilst the Blues supporters behind the goal rocked away like a radio pirate ship caught in a hurricane!

The stress and uncertainty that we all had been feeling, players and supporters alike, had suddenly vanished and now it really was party time. Albert was doing Grandad pogoing, Marlene was wailing, police dogs were getting distressed and even Denzil was sporting a grin. The final whistle blew soon afterwards but it's doubtful anyone really took much note of it. Their supporters had all gone home, and we were still having a disco around the away stand.

Mathematically we are now totally safe of the 'R' word. Of course, that has probably been the case for weeks but it's still nice to be able to state it affirmatively. Accordingly, we are now, just about, a team that can hold its head above water in this division.

We want more than that though, and so there is a tremendous amount of work to be done before we can realistically even begin talking about launching a promotion challenge. Not only in terms of

bringing in new, better, players but also establishing better understandings between those who we will be holding onto come the end of this season.

When Cardwell first arrived at the club, the thought of him partnering Dalby was mouth-watering. Alas though, certainly on today's evidence, they appear to be hardly on talking terms. Not in the sense of not getting on, but rather in views of understanding and appreciating each other's games. Both would win and release the ball only to find that their 'partner' was dancing to a very different tune.

They are two quite similar players and so often find themselves too close together. Thus, taking on responsibility, for either of them, must be a challenge at times. Remove one of them from the picture though and suddenly the other turns from a frog into a swan. The trick then for our coaching staff, is to somehow teach both of them how to paddle effortless alongside the other.

We also need a far more coherent back four. We have lacked a leader back there ever since Sheff Utd recalled their Polish central defender. Accordingly, whilst, as individuals, our defenders perform adequately, as a unit they, are far from organised. Much more efficiency and discipline is definitely required from them.

These are just starters for seven of course. Many more than just these two issues need to be addressed. But for now, three more points earned on the road alongside just as many Blues goals will do very nicely thank you!

Come on you Blues!!