

## Supporters' Forum & Ricky Duncan Q&A

A Supporters' Forum hosted by the Shrimpers Trust was held on 19<sup>th</sup> September in the Shrimpers Bar at Roots Hall.

At the recent MTBD the Trust had conducted a supporters' mini survey in order to get feedback from the Club's fan base on how it was felt they were doing. The Forum on the 19<sup>th</sup> which was open to both Trust and non members was seen as a chance to build on this feedback, as well as providing an opportunity for the Trust to strengthen working relationships with other Southend United supporter groups.

Despite a disappointing turnout from supporters, the evening was overall hailed to have been a success. A full range of topics covering both Trust and other Southend United related matters were discussed, with Paul FitzGerald, as Trust Chairman and the Trust Committee receiving some open and at times direct feedback from the floor regarding how things were and what it was felt needed to change. There were a number of useful suggestions and ideas flagged for further consideration.

The evening concluded with an informative Q&A session with Ricky Duncan: Southend United, Head of Youth.

### Trust History to Date:

Following a customary welcome and introductions, the evening kicked off with a brief history of the Trust. This detailed its start up back in 2000 at a membership of just 150, onto 2006 when with over 1,500 supporters on its books Trust membership was at its highest, through to current numbers of just under 1,000.

It was confirmed that the current Trust Committee comprised of 18 individuals who came from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, each bringing different skills to the table. It was recognised however that the current group was somewhat light on youth!

Bryan Woodford as Trust Vice Chairman at this point took the opportunity to introduce to supporters those Committee members who had been able to attend on the night.

Paul FitzGerald then went on to say that everyone on the Committee was volunteering their time and that he fully recognised that each would have differing priorities to balance, with various pulls on their time. On that basis whatever contribution individuals could manage in support of Trust activities no matter how small, was much appreciated. He covered that the Committee were always looking for more volunteers to help share the load.

Paul emphasised that he and the rest of the Committee were all just ordinary folk trying to do their best. He said that whilst the Committee would at all times strive to ensure that

decisions made were considered and reasonable, it was recognised that at times as a group and as individuals they might get things wrong. What was important however was that the Committee was receptive to any feedback provided, so that lessons could be learnt and that they would therefore hopefully do better next time! An important part of the evening was therefore to listen to any feedback given by supporters and to take this on board.

Supporters were informed that over the last 5 years the Trust had donated just under £100,000 to what had been primarily Southend United related causes, with the biggest current beneficiary being the Youth Department. Other donations made had been to charity including Haven Hospices and other local charities that had benefited through the Trust Player of the Month awards. That said over the last few years it had proved increasingly more difficult for the Trust to maintain a healthy balance sheet. It was highlighted that with membership subscriptions and away travel at break even, profit was primarily generated via fund raising and donations. It was therefore essential that the Trust identified new ways in which it could keep the funds flowing. It was hoped that supporters in attendance today might provide some ideas and pointers.

## **Supporter Feedback:**

**From feedback collated at MTBD it was felt that the Trust Committee did a reasonable job, however in terms of communication with fellow Trust members and other supporters there was room for improvement. The feedback here had been that more could be done by the Trust to advertise what it was working on and was involved in. A re-refreshment of the Trust website had been suggested and it was confirmed to supporters on the night that this action was already underway. Feedback from the floor was that currently whilst the site was available as a source of reference and information; it was viewed as being static and in need of updating with more topical features being added so as to encourage supporters to regularly visit the site.**

In terms of approachability and accessibility, feedback from supporters at MTBD was that the Committee had some work to do here and could do more to raise their profile amongst supporters. It was mentioned that excluding the longer serving Committee members, very few supporters at MTBD said that they knew who the Committee were. An action already taken here was to have the personal profiles of all Committee members posted on the Trust website. A number of attendees on the night said that it was their perception that the Trust Committee members were elitist. There were some discussions around the context of this comment, with agreement that if this was the perception of supporters, it was important that steps were put in place to change this view. To this end Paul FitzGerald again stressed that joining the Committee was open to all Trust members, with there being no restriction on the number of individuals forming the group. The appeal for new blood to join the team indeed proved successful on the night, with Gareth Pummery confirming he was up for the challenge. Gareth's offer was speedily accepted with his addition to the Committee seen as adding to the diversity of the group.

Feedback on the night was sought as to how the Trust could improve its communication with members. It was suggested here that the current newsletter could be supplemented with interim one page editions, giving supporters relevant updates including information relating to meetings with the Club. It was also suggested that twitter could be used to good affect.

The Trust's social and fund raising calendar was also covered when it was detailed that as a general rule social and fund raising events organised by the Trust would be poorly attended, with these largely being only supported by the Trust Committee and their friends and families. Supporters were advised that if they had any suggestions as to any potential activities that might be explored, that this feedback would be greatly appreciated.

In respect of away travel, there had been some feedback at MTBD regarding the arrangements provided by the Trust. Comments made here related to price competitiveness and the fact that with current pick up points, supporters could find it difficult getting home from evening matches if they didn't drive.

The coach travel options provided by both the Trust and TravelZone were discussed and following some debate the consensus was that both provided a different type of travel experience and it was good that supporters were able to choose whichever option suited them best. Everyone was however in agreement that regardless of which travel provider supporters went with, everyone should unite together in the common objective of supporting the team get maximum points away.

In relation to price there were discussions around the Trust's known lack of competitiveness when compared to TravelZone. It was recognised that the key challenge here was that with no current sponsor for away travel it was difficult for the Trust to reduce prices in line with TZ's subsidised levels, without moving the travel account into the red. It was confirmed that to date no travel sponsor partner had been identified by the Trust, with a current barrier being the reputation Southend United have in the local area as being a bad payer. Securing a travel partner(s) however remained a priority for the Trust and it was confirmed that this work was ongoing. It was stressed that any help the membership or other supporters could offer, either in terms of providing names of potential targets or supporting the tender process with prospective partners, would be greatly appreciated. It was in the meantime confirmed that away travel should not be subsidised out of general Trust funds and on that basis until sponsorship for travel was secured, prices would continue to be set so as to break even.

## **Moving Forward:**

**Paul FitzGerald spoke about the Trust's role as liaison between supporters and Southend United. He said that arguably the ongoing lack of information from the Club on Southend United's financial state had led to there being mistrust of the Club on the part of a large number of supporters. It was felt that this had manifested itself in the relationship between some supporters and the Trust.**

Paul said that Tara Brady's input to the Club was clearly to run it from a business perspective and that he was therefore not seen as having any real interest in Southend United from a supporter perspective. Indeed he supported Portsmouth! Paul touched on Tara's current approach of contacting different supporter groups at various points to get any specific feedback that he was after. Paul confirmed that he had no issue with Tara speaking to any other supporter group, but it was important that the various groups worked together so as to ensure that at all times, as a whole, supporters remained in the strongest and best informed position possible. From a Trust perspective it was

recognised that the Club needed to take the Liaison Meetings more seriously, as currently it was not uncommon for actions on the part of the Club to remain open.

Supporters present were asked as to whether it was thought that Board representation was important. The vast majority confirmed that they felt it was. It was however recognised that with Ron Martin as majority shareholder, it was doubtful whether any of the Directors ultimately had any real influence or control over what decisions were made at the Football Club. The consensus was however that whether or not supporter representation on the Board proved to bring any authority with it, the seat on the Board would mean that supporter views and opinions would at least get to the table and would not be misconstrued or diluted on the way. Exactly what the “seat” would look like, if it ever happened, was still not clear.

Whilst as the Forum was brought to a conclusion it was fair to say that there remained some differences of opinion, a positive of the evening was that those present had however agreed the first steps to enable the various supporter groups to work more closely together going forward.

## **Ricky Duncan Q&A**

**Paul Yeomanson as the Trust’s Club Liaison Officer introduced Ricky Duncan, extending a warm welcome to him. Paul noted with disappointment the low turn out for the evening remarking that Ricky’s sessions for supporters regarding Youth Development and Southend United were always value for money and supporters who were absent didn’t know what they were missing.**

In answer to questions from the floor Ricky spoke passionately about the Youth structure. He confirmed his main objective being to produce as many players as possible that made it into Southend United’s first team. Ricky acknowledged the frustrations for supporters when on occasions decisions would be made to sell players deemed of high potential to bigger clubs. If it was however deemed to be good business for the Club and the player wanted to go, this was often seen as the optimum route to take. Ricky confirmed that sell on or other similar clauses would be put in place so that the Club would benefit financially when any boy achieved future success. It often proved difficult to keep players when the bigger clubs were interested.

Ricky spoke about the fact that despite the financial challenges faced by Southend United over recent years, he was appreciative that his budget had not been cut with investment in the Youth Department remaining strong. He spoke of the fact that both Ron Martin and Tara Brady saw clear value and worth in such investment and providing any requests for funding were sound, in general he would be supported.

Ricky was extremely complementary of the team of support staff working around him and identified that the fact this team had been in place long term gave stability and this was seen to have advantage. Ricky said it had taken him and his team five years plus to get the Youth structure to where it was now, but with a lot of hard work and commitment by this team, over time the reputation of Southend United’s Youth policy had been built up from what had been a position of poor perception, to a place where the Club now had an excellent name in Youth Team football. There were good links in place with Premiership clubs, as well as other bigger clubs and that often because of Southend’s renowned Youth set up, youngsters would choose the Club over some Academy sides –

so we must be doing something right! Trials and other player recruitment events would be well attended, with parents who had done their homework often deciding their youngster should choose this Club.

With a number of former Youth players now having broken into the first team squad over the last year, Ricky spoke with pride about his current group of players saying that this included a number of excellent prospects for the future. The players offered scholarships this year had been signed at the start of Ricky's time at the Club and he was very excited at what the future could bring, providing that we could hold onto these players and successfully support their transition into the first team.

Ricky said that he was particularly keen to foster links between the Youth team and supporters. He told those present that this was their club and that the Youth team was a key part of its future. A number of options were discussed that might help bring this relationship to fruition. These included changing the time/location of Youth team matches to encourage more supporters to attend these games, Ricky and his backroom team giving a presentation to fans after a first team match and also getting some of the Youth team youngsters involved in a Q&A session or Trust social events. These suggestions were well received by those in attendance and it was agreed that these should be further discussed off line with Ricky to agree the best way forward.

As part of the consultation process the Trust has already sent out a survey to its members and other supporter organisations to gauge their feelings regarding kick off times for Youth Team matches and what interest there would be in Youth Team specific fundraising events.

Following a very interesting session with Ricky and him having been thanked for his contribution in taking the time to come and speak to supporters, the evening was rounded off. It was confirmed that a record of discussions and any associated actions agreed would be made available to all supporters.