



Saturday 27th September 2014



Southend 1 Shrewsbury 0



They were reflections, two mirror images playing at echoes. Not in terms of physical characteristics of course; Shrewsbury were at least three or four inches taller than us in most departments. But each side was an equal measure of the other when attributes like tactics, attitude and appetite for playing grass level football got taken into account. Easily the best team that we have played this term, this was a very valuable, and hard fought, three points!

The game got off to a slow start.

They took the kick off, attacking towards the South Bank. We'd seen this tactic before though and knew how to deal with it. Accordingly it wasn't long before we, not only had the ball, but were using it to knock upon their door. A neat passing move resulted in the ball going wide out to the lawn in front of the East Stand here White was running forward with intent.

A quick look up, a golfer judging a chip and putt, and then the ball was being swung deep across the box. It's unknown what exactly gave rise to the amount of surprise that this manoeuvre caused the Shrewsbury defence. Perhaps they had been told that only Hurst put in crosses from that area of the pitch. But Rodney prides open his purse with greater alacrity than any that was being displayed by our visitor's as the ball floated towards the far reaches of the penalty area.

Loosely marked, Coulthirst had ambled up the field in his usual casual manner and so was just in the right position to try and curl a header into the far corner of the net from just inside the far edge of the penalty area. From the stands, it looked a rather relaxed effort. A ball has come across; no one else looks interested, let's give it a go for a laugh sort of thing.

Even their goalkeeper seemed to be taking the same view as he slowly began to move to cover the flight of the ball. But then everything suddenly appeared to speed up as the ball flew past the goalkeeper and into the net, triggering multiple launches as the stands flew up into the air in celebration and delight. A goal after just two minutes in a key promotion fixture. Unbelievable!

And we didn't stop there! Inside the next 15 minutes Coulthirst had other such opportunities to increase his goal tally. Only some great saves by a goalkeeper, infuriated at his defence's largesse in allowing our crosses to fly pass them, denying him. Unless Shrewsbury did something fast, and now, we were going to run up a cricket score!

They had had a few long distance shots at goal that, whilst spectacular, lacked the required degree of accuracy. And so our defence, whilst sometimes being breeched, was never under any real threat. Accordingly their by now desperate manager shouted out instructions to his team to change their formation from whatever it had been to something else. For more detail phone Roots Hall and ask for Phil.

It was the first move by either manager in what was to become as much a game of tactics between the two team managers as a battle on the field of play. And, from Shrewsbury's view, it was a shrewd move. No

longer were we so able to break down their flanks and cause utter confusion in their defence. Instead it was now they who were playing the measured, probing, football.

From an excitement take the game died a little during this period, but from a tactical point of view it was fascinating. As eluded to in this reports opening paragraph, these were two very well matched sides and so both were employing tactics they had both practised over and over again upon the training fields. What made life interesting was that each team was employing pretty much the same tactics and so were well briefed upon how both to exploit them and how to rebuff them. So who would come out on top?

Thompson's form since coming into the side has been a revelation. He seems to improve with every airing. Alongside him Prosser has been magnificent all season whilst White, after an indifferent start is also back on form. At left back we of course lost the services of Coker through injury and so that position is being covered by a temporary import from Crystal Palace.

Last Monday evening, Phil Brown had a relaxed meeting with a group of supporters and of course the Thunderbirds were in attendance. The subject of William's loan got raised and the possibility of it becoming longer term discussed. When Coker became unavailable enquiries for loan cover got underway, two players being identified. Both at Premiership clubs, one an untried youngster, the other more experienced, Brown had a decision to make and he opted for the green recruit from Palace.

It has turned out to be a great decision in many ways. Primarily because of how well Williams has adapted to life in the second division and becoming a fully active member of a team. But also because our second option, during his first game for another club, picked up a long term injury after just 20 minutes.

Williams, in Brown's view, has yet to be fully tested. Undoubtedly skilled, his experiences so far in this division have been a breeze for him. He's never had to get out of second gear and Brown harbours doubts about his attitude/response should he ever be put under any real pressure. Not because of there being anything undue about the lad. It was just that he is so inexperienced.

Today we found out! And Williams, like his fellow defenders, dealt with the situation superbly. So whilst Shrewsbury certainly had greater possession of the ball during this period of the game they were rarely allowed to get into a position to exploit it. And when they did, Bentley was always there to deny them. Watched by the England's U21 selectors, our young goal keeper barely put a foot wrong all afternoon. Although one over enthusiastic and badly aimed throw out later in the game did cause us some consternation!

Our midfield of course too contributed towards the cause. The performance of young Jack Payne caught the eye but tight play by both Deegan and Clifford meant that Shrewsbury could never relax on the ball. Hurst's role is not really that of a ball winner but he made his fair share of tackles too whilst maintaining a wide position as an outlet for the ball.

Upfront, Weston was acting as a target man, whilst Coulthirst, his morale through the roof after scoring two in three, was being a constant thorn in Shrewsbury side; enjoying probably his best game yet in a Southend shirt. And so, whilst the boat was being rocked by storm waves, it wasn't leaking. The on watching passengers, some unnamed Thunderbirds amongst them, might have been emitting girly screams at times but then, some people feel the need to do that on perfectly safe fairground rides too!

The end of the first half arrived with the score unchanged. One manager had already felt the need to change tack, would any of the respective halftime briefings result in more? No one knew or in fact really cared. What was causing far more concern was the sorrowful state of the fake United. Despite having had a war chest of 150 million to play with during the transfer window they had somehow ended up with only one fit centre half. It was a Greek tragedy and crocodile tears flowed down our cheeks as we paid 'sympathy' to their plight.

Tears of another form were in evidence though as our various academy sides got paraded around the pitch in front of proud parents. It was just incredible how many teams of youngsters there are in our ranks and whilst the seven year olds seemed a mite over awed by the occasion; the fifteen/sixteen year olds embarrassed, the majority looked to be enjoying being on show. One did wonder though, looking at the hundred or so hopefuls as they made their slow way around the pitch perimeter, just how many would make it through the ranks to become the next Payne or Bentley.

Earlier in this campaign, and indeed across the breadth of many others, we have emerged from the tunnel for the second period with lead in our boots. The opening minutes of the new half seeing us pressed back on the defensive; barely a sign of any energy being expressed anywhere within the team. However, with both managers having made adjustments to their sides shapes, we were now in one geometrical shape, they in another (Again, ask Brown), being asleep was not an option.

Indeed we were showing signs of being the exact opposite as Weston, beating his defender belted a shot goal wards only to see it bounce back off the chest of a surprised goalkeeper. The ball fell kindly to Conor Clifford but his hurried shot was blazed over the bar. A bit more steadiness there, by either player, and the game would have been ours. As it was though things still stood in the balance.

That state of affairs was being reflected by the play as first one team and then the other would have the ball. Shrewsbury though were beginning to feel frustrated and so a number of their players began to receive yellow cards for incautious tackles. Their manager responded by making a double substitution and again changing the shape of his side. Trigger and Denzil were in seventh heaven "Did you know that's the third time this season that Shrewsbury have employed that tactic" one would happily chirp, only to be countered with the observation that "Yes, and that brings their average state maintenance period down to just 0.36 over a thirty minute period". They really know how to live life on the edge those two!

Blues too began to make changes with Atkinson coming on for Hurst. It meant us surrendering up width to accommodate more bite in midfield. But it was in that area of the pitch that the game would now be won or lost and so it was sensible move on the part of our manager. The game had changed too. Whereas both teams had been trying to play the ball along the ground, Shrewsbury were now were beginning to sling high, hopeful balls into the area. Mindful of the late goal we conceded at York to just such tactics, Brown started warming up both Mad Max and Bolger.

However it looked to be a reaction too late as a sky ball, looping across our area caused us worry. Fortunately their mountain of a centre forward, although meeting the ball well, could only steer it inches wide of our far post with Bentley stranded. Phew, a close thing but our slender one goal lead was still intact.

In order to help further preserve it Corr came on in place of the hardworking Payne. An interesting move because Payne, alongside his cohorts Clifford and Deegan had been shoring up most midfield. We had now lost that precocious talent in order to increase our chances of securing a second goal. A bold move? Certainly, but our change back into a regular 4 4 2 formation did seem to cause uncertainty amongst the Shrewsbury ranks and we duly began to profit from the results.

A lovely cross from Weston finding the head of Corr, playing his 150th match for the Blues, whose resulting header from just inside the six yard box was somehow gathered up by their keeper. But for that character we would have already been home and dry. But credit where credit's due, he certainly knew how to make himself look big whenever the situation demanded it.

Bentley's long goal kick got booted back over everyone's heads at it headed towards our goal. Seeing that it was going to land just about plum upon his penalty spot our goal keeper advanced to catch it. As he did so he was jumped into by a forward who was seeing red mist. A few seconds later, he was also seeing red as a second yellow card resulted in his dismissal. With only about five minutes left on the clock it was stupid thing to do and it probably cost Shrewsbury any chance that they may have had to save the game.

However, from somewhere, the ref found six extra minutes of time. Expecting three at the most to take account of the substitutions, our visitors were rejuvenated. A nervous few final minutes occurring as a result. It doesn't seem to matter how many times over the seasons you have witnessed Blues clinging on to a one goal lead as the 90 minute mark approaches; it still hits you just as if it was the first. The palpating heart, the sweating palms, the anxious glances at the ref praying to see the whistle in his mouth. It all come into play and probably always will. And yet we still willingly pay to have our lives shortened!

When the whistle did finally go, it released an outburst of all that tension. Dancing and cheering in the stand matched by the players out on the pitch. Some felt that we hadn't played to our best. May be so, but it had still been good enough to see of one of the best sides in this division. Our mojo might not have been in 100% form but our heart and resolve certainly had been. Taken as a side we possibly hadn't been on par but certain individuals had worn the shirt with aplomb. Thomson could have rarely played better; the same goes for Coulthirst. Prosser was as reliable as usual and Deegan also did no harm to his growing rapport with the fans.

Looking good then? Well, 4th in the table, only goal difference keeping us out of the automatics, you've got to say yes. Concerns do still exist though over our ability to score, what the difference a Tubbs would make to our team. But compared to a few games back we are looking much sharper at the business end of the field. Our defence, well its record of three clean sheets over four games speaks volumes. And with both Mad Max and Bolger pressing for a position that department looks to be in great shape.

Midfield? Extending Deegan's signature to cover the next season or two would be a positive but and there's also the return of Timlin and Leonard to anticipate. Tasty problem for Brown that! Upfront, Coulson and Corr are beginning to zero in on where the empty part of the net lives; so encouraging signs there too. Still, another forward would seal the deal.

Ten games in, another two before the general shape of the season can be acknowledged. With five points separating us from the closest team outside the pay offs that suggests that we are going to be there or thereabouts come the 46th. Lots of games, injuries, suspensions (New Stadiums?) before then and now though so whilst the break report makes good reading, betting the farm upon the year end is not advisable. Well, not just yet!

Come on you Blues!!