

SUSCT NEWSLETTER 15

THE final, painful split came on April 27. We had been together for nearly nine months. Saying that last farewell is always tough, but there comes a time when you know a relationship is not going any further. The ups and downs had now reached the point of no return. I gave one final glance at the object of my affection, which had promised so much, and then.....ripped the Coral's betting slip into shreds and threw it in the kitchen bin. Yup, £10 well and truly down the spout, after my £5ew on Blues to go up at 33s last August had looked such a surefire winner. Even the title seemed on back then. It was going to be the easiest £206.25 I had ever made. But I, and a few others as well, know better now. The one consolation? Surely we will be able to get at least 66s for 2000-01!

So welcome to SUSC NEWSLETTER NUMBER 15, fearless and free, publish and be damned. We have reached that awkward part of the season – the bit right at the end where you begin asking yourself ‘What am I going to do until the next one starts’? Try consoling yourself that, after reading this latest communication, you should be at least five minutes nearer to the big August kick-off.

It is a time for reminiscence this month – starting with the night of the year, the SUSC Player of the Season awards at the Shrimpers Club on May 3. To quote Ali G, big it up for Derek Murr, who oversaw the arrangements with able aid from various other committee officers and ensured the evening was a great success. Around 130 members and guests attended, plus almost all the players and, as usual, the ever reliable John Main. Security was present but never looked like being needed, so thanks for that. John encouraged the players to mix in, sign autographs etc and my short chat with Martin Carruthers showed here is a good lad keen to keep giving it his best for the Blues. I meant to ask him how we managed to score only three goals from the 260-odd corners we forced, but forgot. Finally, after more than two hours of chinwagging and with enough cash put over the bar to buy David Beckham and his horrendous new tattoo, it was the.....gasp.....moment we had all been waiting for. Presentation time.

Trevor got our tear ducts in gear with an emotional address to the assembled throng, reminding us this was the first such supporters gathering since 1992-93. John Main saw the event as showing how much the fans cared and then declared: “While I am chairman, this will happen every year. We are always here for you and will never let you down.” And you know what? You really believed him. Next up it was Rob Newman, who graciously accepted a thoroughly deserved SUSC memento on behalf of Julian Hails. Sadly, Julian, forced to retire by injury, could not make it in person on the night. But I think the reception he got from the fans against Cheltenham showed how much his 100 per cent effort for the team whenever he played was appreciated.

And so to the 3-2-1. David Morley, Martin Carruthers and the SUSC Player of the Season.....Nathan Jones. It may have been Nathan's first-ever award - and thanks to Martin Penton for obtaining the now sought-after shield - but it was well merited. He has made major strides as a player in the last 12 months, as that tremendous strike that rocked the Robins proved. It makes you wonder just how good he might be with a right foot! The bashful Welshman said a few words in gratitude before dashing off to his new BMW and that was about that – barring just about every member of the first-team squad winning either a raffle prize or £20 on the scratch cards. Leo spent so long selecting his bottle of red wine, it was clear he had a major celebration in mind. Probably a toast to his 12 yellow cards – joint ‘best’ in the Third Division along with his great mate Marco Gabbiadini and Rochdale's Keith Hill. SUSC funds were boosted by a very welcome £111. Superb. Just one other quick mention in despatches. The man with the mike, our silver-tongued master of ceremonies Geoff Cox. That bloke is so smooth he should be a professional! Tickets, done free, were by Dave Oliver. Nice one. Overall verdict? Well worth swapping my night off for. See you all again next year.

Of course, there were one or two notable absentees. I don't think I spotted Peter Storrie, though has anyone lately? But when just about all the players responded to the ‘invitation’ to come along, it was a pretty lamentable effort that there was no sign of Alan Little or Mick Gooding. Now I can understand our form of

recent months leading them to expect that a bucketload of brown stuff might be flying in their direction. In fact, I think they would have been very pleasantly surprised. Despite all we have endured during the latest campaign, I sensed no animosity whatsoever to anyone from the playing staff. The attitude seemed to be 'Forget this season, we'll crack it next.' People at least wanted Alan Little to be there. And as it turned out, the fact he was not may actually have done him more harm in our members' eyes than good.

I think it would be fair to say Alan has a big restoration job on his hands for next season. In 1999-2000, as well as being dumped out of every Cup competition at the first-round stage we just stood still in the League. Early promise gave way to virtual stagnation towards the end of the season. In the Cheltenham programme, Alan mentioned regular 'strong performances' and that we had played well most of the time. Sorry, I have not met many of our number who would agree with such a diagnosis. That early promise I mentioned brought us 27 points from our first 16 games. Repeated over 46 matches that would have added up to 77 points – easily enough for a play-off place. Instead we went downhill all the way from there. Our final 30 outings produced a mere seven victories and a paltry 29 points. Similar form all campaign would have seen us finish alongside Exeter, a fraction above the dead zone. Only three home games stick in my mind – i) Brighton for our first-half showing; ii) Beating Swansea, because it proved what an extraordinarily ordinary division the Third now is if they can win it; and iii) Rochdale, where after a disgraceful opening 45 minutes and going 3-0 down we actually went into genuine all-out attack mode for once and reaped the reward by coming back to 3-3. Needless to say almost, instead of learning a lesson from that it was straight back to the dull strictures of 2-3-5.

Our manager admitted after we were beaten at Shrewsbury that the team who looked destined for a close encounter with the Conference almost to the last gasp 'wanted to win more than we did'. Excuse me, but is that not cause for some concern? At that time the sorry Shrews had won a disastrous one game out of 21 and had lost five at home on the trot. But they found us poor enough to batter for 21 corners and everyone I spoke to said we were lucky to get away with just 2-1. To be fair, though, we did end our 620-MINUTE away goals drought, something else our leader seemed oddly unconcerned about. He should have asked our loyal away supporters what they thought of it. His ears would still be ringing.

Herr Little has pointed out we need to bolster our defence by the time hostilities resume. Correct. Only one team in Division Three leaked more goals into their onion bag at home – doomed Chester. He might care to look at midfield as well. Our 29-goal strike-force of Martin Carruthers and Neil Tolson – thank God for one note of optimism – was scandalously let down by the back-up they received from those supposed to create their chances. Our misfiring engine-room contributed a paltry one goal in our last 18 matches – Nigel Pepper against Carlisle. Mark Tinkler for a start seems to get the same reaction approaching within 30 yards of the opposition net as Dracula in the presence of the cross.

Rarely can the purchases we make in the close season – assuming there are some – have been more important. Fans voted with their feet again at Roots Hall in 1999-2000, with, by my calculations, League gates down in total by just over four per cent from around 99,000 to around 95,000. The good will is still there, but fewer supporters each week are prepared to stand by the uninspired. They can empathise with the alleged feelings of one United board member in the directors' box during the underwhelming 2-0 Carlisle win. According to a Carlisle website, this suffering soul had to take a short break from the dismal fare on offer and lamented 'It is bad enough paying their wages, without having to watch them as well'. That clash with the Cumbrians attracted just 3,053 on a Bank Holiday Monday – and diehard Richard Coxell admitted he could not even be bothered to wear his shirt and scarf! I even heard a jibe that we should consider changing our nickname from the Shrimpers to the Jellyfish – because we no longer have any backbone. It is at such times you know all is not well.

I appreciate it sounds like unadulterated doom and gloom. But how do you see our season? Like Alan Little or a true Blue? I mean, was anyone surprised there was no United player in the PFA's Third Division XI? All we ask for 2000-01 is that every team member in the shirt puts in the same effort over 90 minutes as Scott Houghton put into his penalty appeal at Lincoln. That we save sending the team out to 'Let Me Entertain You' until such time as the lads have been genuinely doing just that for a match or six. That we score some goals as a result of hammering the opposition rather than as a response to the first choruses of 'What A Load Of

Rubbish'. We just want a side we can take some genuine pride in once more, who can restore that long-lost atmosphere to Roots Hall and who are capable of mounting a serious promotion challenge. I do not really think that is too much to ask. Or is it?

Your committee met last on April 18, chiefly for an update on our position as regards the Supporters Trust. There was a sensation at the start when it was reported that one or two tongue-in-cheek comments contained within NEWSLETTER NUMBER 14 had not gone down too well at board level, nay, at the very top. Oh dear. All I can say first of all is how flattering that the board read the newsletter. And secondly no changes are in the pipeline. S USC is 100 per cent behind the football club and all that John Main, who is doing an admirable job in the face of adversity, is trying to achieve. But we are not in its pocket. The newsletter is written for no one but our members, United faithful to a man – and woman. I am a fan and any off-the-cuff comments I make are made as one. Nobody is beyond salutes or slatings – S USC or S UFC. Which is how it should be. The committee's next full get-together is on May 30.

Great news on the website. Richard and 'Scorch' now have their act in top gear and the S USC web page will soon be up and pumping on the net. There is already a load of great stuff contained within, especially the absolutely superb archive and heritage material that Richard has put together, with more ideas bubbling under the surface. The site to surf is www.susc.co.uk It should be available almost immediately, so get it in that 'favourites' queue.

To say our leading lights on the Supporters Trust front are taking a professional line is putting it mildly. A meeting has been had with one of the Northampton set-up's top organisers, while Derek already has a solicitor on board who is well versed in such football issues and was even involved in the Everton takeover by Bill Kenwright. But to reiterate, if we are to raise money for the football club S USC is adamant we will want a say in its running. Frittering our cash away will not be part of the plan. Sums raised would be best put in a tax-exempt fund for charities. These cannot make a profit – returns must be invested back into a set cause e.g. Southend United FC. If the club hits difficulties, we would have our fund available and could offer assistance. Overall, though, the strategy is to take the best bits of similar efforts made by supporters of other clubs. And it was agreed that our sub-committee of Derek, Trevor Bashford, Paul Fitzgerald and Kirstine Nicholson should press ahead with their already sterling efforts.

Paul also has a meeting lined up with Ron Martin. Ron, who has been sunning himself on holiday – Jersey? Cayman Islands? – is apparently frustrated by fans' continuing fears that all is not well with the new ground. Our answer will always come in two words. Anton Johnson. Promises are fine, but concrete action is the only thing that counts. Paul's ceaseless push to increase our burgeoning membership base has now roped in Peter Mason. Peter, remember, is the author of the classic tome 'Southend United – The History of the Blues'. Meanwhile Ron Pountney, whose testimonial match against Premiership new boys Charlton has been confirmed for Tuesday, August 1, has joined our select cadre of honorary members. One more reminder – when your membership renewal is due it really would help if you coughed your cash without the need for multiple requests.

The football club open day this year is on July 16 at Boots and Laces. We will be formulating our arrangements for that on May 30, when the issues of the new ground and season tickets will again be to the fore.

I trust Martin Carruthers' brother is recovering from the bit of Wild West action that saw him get shot recently. Bit of a wincer that the Echo should refer to Martin as the 'Nottingham hitman' in its report of the incident.

The Torquay game was excellent, I thought. No, not the one where we were rolled over again. I mean the action involving our under-nine and under-ten kids at half-time. Looked like some good prospects there, even at those tender ages. As long as none of them turn into Steve Hatter or Derek Hall.

Ever watch Soccer Extra on Sky on a Sunday morning? It is the first opportunity to see or relive the Blues' weekend action. Only one thing spoils it for me. The insistence of reject ITV presenter Matt Lorenzo on referring to Southend as Sar-fend every time he mentions us, as if all the town's inhabitants are refugees from Cockneyland. Get a life, mate. Or consider changing that M of your first name to Pr.

Marathons. Not for me. I prefer a 6,000-yard walk round the golf course. But if you saw a Blues shirt on display during the recent London event, it could well have been Ian Leask from Minneapolis. Ian, one of our illustrious cluster of exiled members, was back in Blighty to take part in the 26-mile slog and asked Richard to fix him up with the haute couture. Delighted to oblige – and we hope the pain was worth it.

In case any of you have not seen the club's match programme lately, is there any member out there with a spare £9,000 to hand? That is the sort of sponsorship cash we are seeking for our much praised away travel next season. Even in the depths of despair over the last couple of months, the usual unwavering suspects have been filling the SUSC coach and letting the world know just how many coachES we could fill regularly with a team whose form made missing their away days unthinkable. Chris Berry has done a superb job of organising our transport since taking over from Clare Crammond - now departed to Birmingham - and will be carrying on the good work next season.

Any reaction or comment on the above can be directed to nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk Other pertinent matters you may wish to raise can be taken up with our SUSC officials, all of whom are only too delighted to help in whatever way they can.

I leave you with a question rejected as a potential jackpot job for Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? Which Southend United 'hero' of the 90s became a father for the first time at the age of 15? (Clue: he has been substituted in a Cup Final). Until next month.....

NR

P.S. Where is the retained list?