

SUSCT NEWSLETTER 17

Chairmen come and chairmen go. But let us not pretend that Southend United and its supporters will not have not lost a friend and ally if the shock axing of John Main is upheld, as seems inevitable. So ‘shock’ that the original NEWSLETTER NUMBER 17 had to be ripped from the presses on July 24 and revamped in its present guise.

John may not have been able to transform the football club’s dire financial position as swiftly as he might have liked. But on finding that our first major fixture of the season was a hell of a lot tougher than expected – the Inland Revenue away at the Royal Courts of Justice – he sure as hell was not going down without a fight. He felt he should have been able to rely on certain parties to provide immediate guarantees over the £400,000 the taxman was demanding. And when those guarantees looked as if they might not be met, he let his feelings be known. Now his candour has cost him his job, barring a highly unlikely change of heart at the forthcoming board EGM, with the usual cancer of personality clashes hovering in the background. His ultimate employers appear to have decided he might just have got a bit too close to the club, might not be cracking the whip sufficiently, might even – perish the thought – be getting too native with the terrace monkeys. In fact, I reckon as far as we were concerned this made him something of a visionary. Here was a chairman who, having had no past links to or love for Southend, actually appeared to have been bitten by the same bug that still induces the 3,500 faithful to make their way to Roots Hall every alternate Saturday to urge on THEIR team. He had become one of us – and that, in the end, was his fatal mistake. Big business demands single-minded devotion to duty. Stray from the straight and narrow and, as Delancey have demonstrated, you pay the price. We might have been bailed out at the very last minute from the brink of oblivion, but the cost has been high.

John had his disagreements with fans, but for the most part never shied away from facing them. His ‘Meet The Chairman’ nights failed to take off probably because they were too formal for most people rather than through any lack of interest. Fans will turn up for a get-together, but have little desire to start making appointments. It was almost like asking for a date! Personally, I admired his efforts to involve us in the club, as well as the way he rebuilt bridges with both the council and the community. Such common sense within English football is a rarity these days and the Edwardses, Sugars, Hill-Woodses, Ellises etc could learn a hell of a lot from his approach. Let me give you an example. Last month I bought my first Blues season ticket in 39 years. As I left the ticket office, John came out of the main entrance. He was accompanied by our new central defender, Phil Whelan, who had just signed on the dotted line. John and I exchanged a wave and, before I knew it, he was trotting over to introduce me to the new boy. Or should I say giant. It was a gesture like that which lets you know your support might just count for something. And it reminds you why you are prepared to endure season after season of letdown to stick by a club like Southend rather than turn traitor and join the sheep flocking to the top guns. How many Premiership followers can truly feel that same sense of worth? I mean, did Harry Redknapp trot round the Upton Park car park with Davor Suker? Was George Graham hauling them off Tottenham High Road to meet Sergei Rebrov? Come off it. The question now is will the new man at the top, assuming John’s bid to cling to power fails, have that same foresight?

Paul FitzGerald and I met Ron Martin for a general chit-chat on the new stadium back on July 7. There is no doubt the man strikes as a hard-nosed businessman on top of his subject. But whether Ron Martin, Steve Martin, Geoffrey King or Ben E. King takes up the reins – you will probably know by the time you read this – he, Martin Dawn plc, Delancey Estates, South Eastern Leisure Ltd, whoever, would be making a grave mistake if they think the Blue Army would appreciate a return to Vic-style dictats and having fans’ legitimate views treated with disdain. Work kept me from the Gillingham friendly, but Richard Coxell informed me that very message was made plain to the directors’ box. John, and a few other enlightened souls within the game, have seen that nothing but strife lies down that road. The SUSCT will want to work with whoever now settles in to rule the roost and, hopefully, they will want to include rather than exclude us. Any other method of operating, bearing in mind the club’s current financial strife, is signposted ‘Disaster’. As for morale, this has got the season off to a great start – I don’t think!

Of course, John Main's fight for survival might succeed. But if I want to get a mention in the newsletter for Ron Pountney's testimonial, I cannot afford to wait and find out. I'll paint the bleak picture today (July 26) and maybe tomorrow the whole scenario will have changed. Or perhaps it won't..... The important thing is Southend United lives on. Delancey delivered at the 11th hour and Mr Registrar Buckley did not have to pull the plug on 94 years of history. For that we can be truly thankful.

You may have noticed I said SUSCT rather than S USC in the previous paragraph. Yup, from now on you must trust in the Trust. The Southend United Supporters' Club has taken the plunge and we now sink or swim as the Southend United Supporters' Club Trust. Our prime aim is to help raise funds for United and eventually, following up on a government initiative, to have the supporters' voice heard on the club board.

In the current circumstances there has never been more of a need for a cohesive supporters' organisation. If you are already a part of it, great. But if you know anybody else who should be a part of it, get them involved as well. Sign up.

There were around 50 members and other interested parties at the Shrimpers Club on the evening of July 11 for our EGM. It proved the occasion when all the groundwork done by Derek Murr, Paul Fitzgerald, Trevor Bashford and Kirstine Nicholson came to fruition and, hopefully, from now on our power to influence as United fans will be considerably enhanced. For all the Trust details and technical data, please turn to the 'Trust' page on the S USC(T) website. If you were already a member of the Supporters' Club, and your membership was paid up to date, you are now an automatic SUSCT member. You do NOT need to send a new membership fee until you receive your reminder from Paul. We still recommend anyone under 16 to join the Junior Blues rather than the Trust. Derek reports Trust correspondence so far as very positive, apart from one Jonah who insisted we were all going to end up "shafted". It wasn't George Soros was it? Anyone wishing to join our happy band can obtain application forms from Paul or Derek. Our completed Trust brochure, produced entirely by Derek, is due for distribution in the near future. It has a planned initial print run of 1,500. Persons wanting to make a donation – however large or small – can do so to our Hon. Sec. Mr Murr. Cheques are payable to: Southend United Supporters' Club Trust Ltd. They can be handed over in person to any committee member - and there are now even more of those to choose from – or sent to our business address: 17 Briarswood, Springfield, Chelmsford, Essex. CM1 6UH.

The EGM saw Trevor 'run through' at length the whys and wherefores of our transition to Trust status, following another well merited vote of thanks for those already mentioned committee officials who did so much of the groundwork. "We are at a crossroads," declared Trevor – just as daughter Zoe's mobile went off. Rumours were rife it was Irene saying dinner was getting cold.

The meeting was then addressed by Brian Lomax, a figurehead of the Northampton Town Trust who now sits on their club's board of directors. Their Trust has helped bring Northampton back from the abyss of a £1.6m debt, has raised £100,000 since its inception and currently owns, following share purchases, 8 per cent of the Town set-up. Northampton's local council did not allow their Sixfields Stadium to be built until they were given a guarantee of Trust representation on the board of directors for 25 years. Southend Council might like to mull that one over when considering planning permission for Fossetts Farm! Brian recommended our switch to Trust status, a road now taken by fans from the likes of Celtic to Walsall and Lincoln, with the rallying cry: "Supporters are just as much investors in a football club as any shareholders or directors." He was reminded that John Main had been wary of fan representation at board level at Southend. But Brian's reply was almost Mystic Meg. He declared: "Chairmen and directors come and go. You have to look to the future of Southend United Football Club, which may well be around longer than him." Little did we know! League clubs have supported the current government's directive on fan representation on boards and Brian will be writing to the League to remind them of this.

After that it was down to the relevant votes – change of name, election of Trust Board members and committee members, enshrining of the Trust constitution, aims and goals etc. All passed fairly smoothly bar the odd, but legitimate, point-raising sprinkled with jovial cries of "b*****s" from the gentleman in the Argentina shirt

clutching a foaming glass of amber nectar. A massive ta very much as well to Alan Perry, whose raffle efforts raised a magnificent £192.82.

Elected SUSCT officials were as follows.- **TRUST BOARD MEMBERS:** Trevor Bashford, Richard Coxell, Paul Fitzgerald, Derek Murr, Sir Teddy Taylor MP. **SECRETARY:** Derek Murr. **CHAIRMAN:** Trevor Bashford. **VICE-CHAIRMAN:** Richard Coxell. **TREASURER:** Craig Fillary. **MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY:** Paul Fitzgerald. **PR/PRESS OFFICER:** Jeff Allen. **FUND-RAISING, MARKETING and PR COMMITTEE:** Trevor, Jeff, Paul, Derek, Jerry Moss, Martin Penton, Nigel Rickard plus nominees Kerry Denton and Donna Fillary. **TRAVEL CLUB COMMITTEE:** Trevor, Derek, Martin, Chris Berry, Martin Cranmer. **FINANCE COMMITTEE:** Trevor, Derek, Richard, Paul, Craig. **ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE:** Trevor, Derek, Richard, Paul.

Our committees lasted intact precisely nine days. At our general committee meeting on July 20, the host with the most, Jeff Allen, resigned as PR/Press Officer to become Southend United's representative within the Trust. Jeff now has responsibility for liaison between the Trust and the football club and looks ideally placed to foster further the relationship between the two parties. He had John Main's support and it would be nice to think he will have John's (possible) successor's. Kerry Denton bravely volunteered to take over as our PR/Press Officer. Jeff's place on the Fund-raising, Marketing and PR Committee went to welcome young whippersnapper David Scriven, while Donna Fillary was added to the Administration Committee.

A work meeting meant Trevor was unable to attend. Unfortunate, as new treasurer Craig was gagging to get hold of the accounts. In fact, he was gagging almost as much as the winner of the Prediction Competition to get hold of his winnings! Meanwhile, Derek is working on a facility with the Co-operative Bank for anyone who wants that loan to enable them to invest with the Trust. Go on, you know you want to.

John Main had informed us that there are no valid United shares available for purchase at the moment, ownership of which would naturally be a prerequisite for any future board involvement. That is a real shame. If I had any shares I wanted to get rid of, I would definitely *GIVE* them or *DONATE* them to the Trust out of a spirit of pure philanthropy. Ah, the joy of wishful thinking. Could such generosity really exist somewhere out there?

The Trust's chief goal, clearly, is to do all in its power to help keep the good ship Southend United afloat in these rocky times by whatever means we can. Paul informed the EGM that United, as a club, currently have no assets of their own whatsoever. We will also keep acting as a well-meaning pressure group when the need arises – as it did following the long delay in the revelation of the plans for the new ground. But, as if by magic, that delay is over and the drawings for our new £12.5m, 16,000-capacity stadium within the proposed £46m Fossetts Farm leisure development off Eastern Avenue are on the table at last.

Whether the table is as far as they ever get remains to be seen. Some of the typically wishy-washy comments from the local politicians ensured, as usual, that over-optimism about swift council approval is not something we need worry about. When you see them bandying words like "concerns," "meeting criteria", "constraints on finance" you sense one or two are just waiting to put the boot in. SUSCT members can assist by possibly letting Lansbury Developments Ltd of Billericay know, in the nicest possible way, of course, about their part in holding things up. Any compulsory purchase battles for portions of Fossetts land are the last thing the club needs. United are also going to require continual bailing out until the day in 2004 when the first ball might be kicked at the new venue. So do not for a minute think our troubles are anywhere near over.

It was interesting to see that the area which must be set aside at the new complex for the remains of the Bronze Age fort appears larger than that for the stadium itself. Monuments also always need topping off with something. What about a new club trophy cabinet! Looking at the impressive computer-generated ground plans, only one thing seems lacking for me – a bit of terrace. I cannot believe even one small section at the 'home' end of the stadium, whichever that is, could not be designated for those who might wish to stand at a reduced price. We might even guarantee the atmosphere that long ago evaporated from Roots Hall. Must we bow again to the control freakery operated by political puppets and opportunists, the police, UEFA (starring

Sepp Blunder and Lennart 'Ten Dinners' Johansson), a Merseyside organisation one dare not criticise, jobsworth stewards and council safety officers who insist we should all be seated for our own good and grateful for it? Or am I being a dinosaur? What do you think?

The old committee met for the last time before the EGM on July 8. Trevor, feeling the pace and hassle of his tedious Southend-Edinburgh commuting, had one bit of good news. The switching of United's trip to Blackpool to Friday, October 6, so it does not clash with England's latest World Cup battle with the Fatherland the next day, means he no longer has to choose between Blues and Zoe's graduation. Priorities, priorities. The one issue other than the EGM format and the new ground discussed in any depth was next season's coach travel. It was agreed we would look to stick with Supreme, but gather one or two other quotes for comparison. It has to be hoped John Bridge will be as agreeable as he has been in the past now that he has quit the United board in the wake of the current upper echelon fiasco.

Our Open Day efforts on July 16 raised around £200 for the coffers, with some useful lessons learned for the future. The raffle for Martin Carruthers' shirt was won by Ron Pountney, who now plans to auction it off as one of his fund-raisers. Luke Bosman took home the Neville Roach shirt, while Paul's donated 'Shut Up' t-shirt (South Upper in-joke there) went to Mike Way. Salutes to Chris Berry and Zoe, king and queen of the bouncy castle.

A work colleague asked me the other day if I fancied dusting off my cricket whites for a game. Looking for a polite way out, I asked when the game was. TUESDAY, AUGUST 1, he replied. My answer was obvious. No chance. For that is the day of RONALD POUNTNEY'S TESTIMONIAL! So cancel all other appointments and ensure that Ron gets the night he deserves for his seasons of solid service – especially after waiting 14 years. Blues play newly Premierised Charlton – minus Simon Royce following his interesting move to Spud's Leicester - preceded by what should be a bit of fun between Blues Veterans from '80-81 and a team of London Veterans led by Garry Nelson. Garry's efforts are such that I will try to forgive the load of old codswallop he wrote in his first book concerning tabloid football reporting. Ron, who made 349 first-team appearances and scored 54 goals during his 10 years of toil, deserves a good turn-out. It would be very disappointing if there were not at least a realistic 5,000 present. Do your duty!

August 1 is also an important date in the calendars of countless saddos around the world. It is the day when they can get their hands on the ghastly new M***** U***** shirt and imagine they are a football supporter. The club we love to hate (amongst umpteen others) reckon they will shift a MILLION of their rags this season at around £50 a touch and are also looking forward to a 2000-01 TV take of £30m. That is £80m before the first Old Trafford 'fan' has ventured through a turnstile. And yet Edwards and Co would happily see us go down the toilet for the want of a £400,000 bill from the inspector. It's a 'funny' old game...

At least Darlo chairman George Reynolds is fighting back. Finding that Neil Heaney earned nearly £150,000 last season, he has halved club bonuses in a bid to bring some sanity back to the wage structure. The former safecracker, now a chipboard multi-millionaire, declared: "The money in the game is taking football away from the working man and without my kind of stand it will cease to exist." He is writing for backing to every other Nationwide League chairman. We know John Main was listening. Let's pray the rest do the same. Old George will be wasting his breath at the very top, though. Everton offered Nick 'two-month wonder' Barmby a club record £27,000 a week to stay at Goodison. Barmby (born in Hull!) insisted it had always been his dream to play for his boyhood heroes, Liverpool, and he wanted to move. I don't suppose the fact they were offering him £37,000 a week had anything to do with it – and pigs will fly over Fossetts Farm.....

New season ticket holders – like me - have just received £20 of free vouchers to spend in the club shop. You get £5 off for every £25 you spend. So if you buy a new club shirt for around £40, that is not enough to get £10 off. You need to spend another £10. That means you get your £10 off the £10 thing you did not really want and pay full whack for the shirt. Pure genius. Don't forget, too, the MBNA Southend United Platinum Plus Visa Card. If you have one, every time you use it the credit card company hand the club a small royalty. Now every little helps, so I rang MBNA to see if I could change my ordinary MBNA Platinum Plus Visa Card into one with Southend United on the front. After all, that has to be the only difference between them. Of course, they said –

as long as I filled in another application form. But aren't the cards the same? Well, yes, but.....regulations. I told them I could not be Arsenal and Blues lost out on a few more pennies.

Apart from Phil Whelan, it looks like full-back Damon Searle from Carlisle will be our only other immediate first-team signing. So where is that desperately-needed attack-supporting midfielder? (Unless Kevin Maher was him? Has David Lee really signed?) My Carlisle contact says they got rid of Searle because he wanted a grand a week. I wonder what we got him for. Best of luck to the new boys, anyway. Searle replaces Nathan Jones, who departed for Brighton pleading he was "no money-grabber." Fair enough, and I am sure he is devastated (relieved) to be missing our little get-together on August 12.

United's first four 'open-door' pre-season games do not give the impression we are setting the world alight early doors. Perhaps all that male bonding on the week with the RAF has been praying on the lads' minds! Getting rough and ready with the forces is a popular pre-season ploy for many sides. Trouble is, plenty of those who have swanned off in the past with the Army, Marines etc have simply ended up knackered from climbing sand mountains or lumping logs through rivers before a ball is even kicked. After England's Euro 2000 experience/nightmare, I would have thought a bit of extra time spent making sure all our players could use two feet might have been a more beneficial exercise. Still, if we get promotion we will hail it as a master-stroke. For now, let's reserve judgement.

Our six-figure Rebus home shirt sponsorship over two years looks a real coup. With a turnover of £104m last year, they clearly have some financial clout. But remember the sponsorship is performance-related. So if we turn it on as we did last season, expect the six-figure cheque to read: £1,000.00. Steve Clarke sounds like a good-un, travelling from Wales to all Blues home games. I can't even persuade some to come from Leigh. Anyway, nice to see Steve's 'Wyndham's Plastics' logo on our away kit. SUSCT kit sponsorship will now see Martin Carruthers joined by up-and-coming hopeful Tom McDonald, as Gary Cross has been retained by his sponsor from last season.

A few more names on the e-mail newsletter distribution list, for which 'gracias'. Richard's and my last 270-envelope sticking down and posting session ended with Paul getting a phone call from the Royal Mail's revenue protection department first thing next morning to say that the weight of 227 of them was not covered by their first-class stamps. Oops! We knew they were bulging, but not to that extent. A cheque was despatched to cover the underpayment. Without that, you lucky 227 would have been receiving a wake-up call from Postman Pat asking for cash before he would have handed over your favourite letter of the month.

Did you see that Becks, Posh and Brooklyn spent some time down on Southend seafront recently? They were probably trying to decide between AC Milan and Blues. After all, who needs Gucci, Armani or any of that other rip-off merchandise when you can pop into our club shop? SUFC head scarf and sarong anybody?

By the way, anyone thinking of saving their Roots Hall entrance money and hoping to put their feet up and catch Blues on the box this season can forget it. Sky are showing just two Division Three games before December 27 – neither encounter featuring our heroes. You can suffer Macclesfield v Darlington on September 22 and endure Kidderminster v Blackpool the following week. Yawn! Our Worthington Cup clashes with Birmingham might tempt them, though.

Right, there you go. Another one bites the dust. Any reaction to the contents herein, just get on the wires to: nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk

NR (26/7)

PS: 1) Any golfers out there? If so, polish up your niblicks and prepare for the SUSCT Golf Day, coming to a venue near you soon / eventually. More details in NUMBER 18.

2) Whatever happened to John Piekalnietis?

3) Peter Mason – thanks again for the kind words.

4) Can anybody build Jerry Moss a seafood stall in the WestStand?

5) Many thanks to Lewis from the club's accounts office and Clare in the ticket office, who spent about half an hour communicating by walkie-talkie while I decided on my new season ticket location in the East Stand. They were a credit to United. And now I know, hopefully, all the matches will be played!