

SUSCT NEWSLETTER 22

SO what is it going to be? All miserable and depressed or a look on the bright side? Well, I know what I prefer. So let's leave the death throes of our 2001 FA Cup bid, the transfer-listing of Martin Carruthers and how we let a £4million-rated goal machine slip through our fingers until a bit later and kick off with.....Cleopatra and a nun.

Our director of travel, Chris Berry, collected together a weird and wacky assortment of our members anxious to get a free pre-Christmas trip to Shrewsbury by turning up for the coach journey in fancy dress. Cleopatra and the nun were just two of the offerings, along with three of the baddy from 'Scream', Mrs Santa, Batman, a soldier and a schoolgirl in an overall cast of 24 who bravely and entertainingly opted to change their personalities for the day. Everyone had a good laugh, the event was a success and, though we lost the corner count 10-0, Ben Abbey nodding in the winner at least showed our nun's prayers were answered. The Shrews had thoughtfully disinfected their pitch following the floods – and we came up smelling of roses.

The role of Cleopatra was played by Donna Fillary. They will be putting forward nominees for Woman of the Year shortly. So, as we delve deeper into SUSCT NEWSLETTER NUMBER 22, let me put forward two who are guaranteed to get no votes but I reckon are made of the stuff that should see them right at the top of the poll.

Firstly Donna herself, who after doing a great job of arranging our October quiz night and the parachute jump took on the mammoth task of organising and making a huge success of the Christmas Draw. We more than covered our costs, meaning further funds for United, and Donna need surely have no fears that anyone might suspect a fix simply because her dad won third prize! Our 500th member, Nicola Stott, did a fine job of selecting the winner's name from that battered cardboard box at half-time against Leyton Orient on Boxing Day and looked resplendent in her Blues shirt. We had hoped to use United's old tombola drum for pulling the winning tickets, but it seems it was pilfered years ago. Do I hear Anton as the chief suspect? So, to the prize-winners:

£1,000 - Sandip Bhattacharya from Sutton in Surrey.

£500 - Lisa Drury (St Lawrence Bay). I think that's Essex not Canada.

£100 - Alec Frost (Ipswich). A.k.a. Donna's dad and the only SUSCT member in the top three!

Two tickets to United match of choice - P Warner (Southend).

£10 Safeway voucher - Andrew Maul (Woodford Green). Also gets a well-deserved bottle of champagne for selling the most tickets, a magnificent £300 worth.

£10 Sara Ahern (Crawley).

Bottle of sparkling wine - Paul Collins (Eastwood).

Bottle of red wine - Tony Garner (Basildon).

Bottle of red wine - John Van Praaer (Chelmsford).

£5 McDonald's vouchers - J Crew (abode unknown); Roger ? (London). No surname given; Nigel Rickard (Hadleigh). My nephew says thanks a lot; Linda Bell (Wisbech); Oscar Cardozo (London).

Two free travel places on SUSCT coach - Gordon Park (Thorpe Bay).

After Eight mints - Richard Coxell (Leigh-on-Sea). Said to have guzzled the box already.

All the winners should have received their prizes by now. Any problems, ring Donna on 01702-512169 or e-mail craiganddonna@supanet.com

Mention of the quiz night reminds me that the original scheduled date for MkII – February 17 – has now been altered to March 10, after the Blackpool clash. Apparently the romantics in our number fear that the 17th will see them all on night out duty for Valentine's Day.

DONNA will again be coordinating table allocations for the evening, which will once more be at Boots and Laces with the usual 7.30pm for 8pm start. Entry is £5.50 per-person, with food included. If you wish to book, contact our leading lady on the above telephone number or e-mail address. And remember, we could have filled five more tables back in October so get in quick.

Yet this is far from the end of our Fund-Raising and Marketing supremo's plans. We have also scheduled a Race Night in the Shrimpers Club for Friday, April 20, with a sponsored abseil and a night at Romford dogs also on the drawing board for the near future. What a gal! And as if that little lot was not enough, Martin Penton is already looking ahead to our second Player of the Year night. Watch out for the date of that, probably in Number 23.

At the Trust's committee meeting on January 8, our treasurer Craig Fillary painted such a glowing picture of our finances that we felt the time was now right to put some of that money into the football club – just as the Trust is mandated to do. So on February 17 the SUSCT will be sponsoring the game against Halifax. Sorry the fixture is possibly not the most glamorous, but we have already played almost all the top sides at the Hall and Rochdale was already taken. This would also appear to be the ideal fixture for Sven Goran Eriksson to pop down and have a look at the lads!!! For our fee of £1,000 (plus, of course, the obligatory VAT) we receive a number of kick-backs from United – not least use of an Executive Suite (box to you and me) for the game, plus the usual 'refreshments' etc. Therefore our membership secretary Paul FitzGerald will be selecting 20 members at random from our now 530-plus total to do the grand and enjoy the day at our expense. See what all these non-members are missing? The names of the lucky 20 will be circulated a.s.a.p.

Thanks this time to Martin for doing the arrangements on that one. He has also taken over as our deputy Press and PR Officer, now that No1 Kerry Denton has a slightly different presentation taking up all of her time at the moment. For Kerry has just given birth to new baby son Joe. So congratulations from everyone at the Trust to her and Cliff and she should have received a nice bouquet of flowers from us to mark the happy event.

Martin has been in further touch with the club following another outbreak of the deadliest entity since the Ebola virus surfaced – the Curse of the Trust. This canker has already claimed victims as varied as Regis Coulbault and Neville Roach to name but two. Now this season's Trust-sponsored duo, Tom McDonald and Martin Carruthers, have revealed all the classic symptoms. Tom has given the club up and Martin, after looking as if he might be getting back on song at Brighton, is on the transfer-list and supposedly looking for pastures new. Such a shame, but he has clearly been unsettled since Ron ruled out any inflation of the pay packet. I would also still maintain that the service he has been given for most of this season, especially from the flanks, has been well below what he might have expected. If Martin had had a fiver for every aimless long ball pumped his way he could afford to retire now. The collapse of a potential move to C** U was a lucky escape for him. But if he does go, it must now be all about how much we can get and who better Webby can land to replace him. Without a reliable goalscorer we will surely be dead in the water. Anyway, it was agreed the Trust's cash backing should shift from Tom to unsuspecting little Russell Williamson, with a further decision to be made should MC exit.

Talking of goalscorers, let's mull over Rayleigh's favourite son Neil Harris. The Millwall ace, 23, is the Nationwide League's leading hitman this season with 21 goals – 20 in the League. The Lions have already

turned down a £2.5million Preston bid for him and he is estimated now to be worth at least £4m. He could also have been ours – for NOTHING!

Seven years ago he hit a mere 92 goals in one season for Rayleigh Boys Under-16s. Then, as he revealed: “I went to Southend, had one trial with 30 other lads and that was it. I would not say I am bitter about it, but I would like to get Southend in the Cup (sadly not this season) and score a few goals at Roots Hall.” Oops! Neil combined working for a Japanese bank and playing part-time for Cambridge City before a £30,000 move to the New Den, where his Millwall tally currently stands at 64 goals in 113 games. Read and weep.

PROBLEMS at the ticket office have upset some of our members. So Derek Murr is to meet Barbara Harding to try to iron out assorted annoyances. These include ordered tickets not being ready for collection and the pre-match craziness at games where we get a half-decent crowd which sees dozens of people still battling to buy their way into the ground minutes after the action has started. And what about the Orient ticket distribution post-LDV Vans triumph over Cambridge? This looked like another off-the-cuff brainwave to get more people on LDV duty. And, to a degree, maybe it succeeded as 1,694 turned up compared to the 1,000 for Cheltenham. But work kept me away from the action, so as a season ticket-holder one was not amused seemingly to be ignored. Thanks to the vice-chairman for sorting me out.

If you have an emergency concerning either the football club or ourselves on which you think the Trust should act, you can contact Martin Penton on 07980-379372. He may be able to offer some off-the-cuff ‘Dear Deirdre’-style advice or he can decide on whether it is something that perhaps deserves committee consideration. I stress ‘emergency’ – not run-of-the-mill or downright daft!

OK, who thinks I have forgotten my other wonder woman? Wrong. Step forward Kate Hoey. Sports Minister Kate, like numerous other Blues backers, agrees there should once again be a place for some limited terracing at grounds for those who want it. So she valiantly put the notion up for discussion. In return she was pilloried by every pc luvvie, hack, safety officer, Radio Five Live presenter and Labour politico with one eye on brown-nosing to the PM. Not that the contributions of the Tories and Lib-Dems were much better. For it seems this is a subject that in our great ‘democracy’ you are not allowed to debate in public – or even hint at – unless you want to be tarred as all but unbalanced for daring to speak the unspeakable.

This is an issue about which I have always felt strongly, particularly following the rush to all-seater stadia post-Hillsborough and the way the policy caught United in its net. I could not even begin to imagine the trauma that those who lost relatives, friends or loved ones suffered on that fateful day. But, personally, I have never believed it was the terrace itself that led to those horrific 96 deaths back in April 1989. In the eyes of Mrs Thatcher at the time, though, it was the simplest and easiest get-out when it came to apportioning blame. Terracing can be safe – even Taylor accepted that - and many supporters want well-regulated standing areas back within football. And they are not all beer-bellied, tattooed thugs just itching for a fight, as was the inference once her opponents got stuck into Kate Hoey. A poll, albeit small, on one of the United websites found that around 70 per cent would like to see a standing area at Fossetts Farm. The Trust committee is split about 50-50. Are those ‘pro’ lobbies all hooligans? Has the Bundesliga got it wrong? I can perfectly understand why the Hillsborough Support Group is always called upon by TV and radio to put the ‘anti’ case on this issue every time it is aired. But I hope I am not offending anyone when I say there are other diverse and valid opinions on the matter of terracing at football grounds which equally deserve to be heard, listened to and understood – minus the hysteria. Kate had the guts to outline her position – and has probably sunk her political career. Is that really right?

SUPPORTERS Direct informed Derek that terracing at any new ground should be capable of conversion back to seating, but is allowable. The top two divisions should be all-seater by law (Fulham? Grimsby?), but the Football Federation acknowledge a campaign to change this. Any comments, you know where I am.

Now I have got that off my chest, I don’t think we can ignore any longer a rundown of other recent performances – starting with the highlight of 2001 to date.

Having to work on New Year's Day – yes, some of us have to - meant I was ruled out of joining the jamboree down to the South Coast. At least there was time for Preston v Bolton on Sky before heading to the capital. Every few minutes I uttered a nervy 'Come on, Blues' in the hope it would miraculously conjure up a goal flash at the bottom of the screen. Aye, aye it's 1-0 to Burnley against Wolves. No, now it's 1-1.....and so on. But no info from the Withdean, which is how it stayed until the final whistle sounded on a comfy 2-0 Bolton victory at Deepdale. So I assumed we had held on for a decent 0-0 draw.

Flicking over to BBC2 purely by chance, there was Procul Harum legend and Southend High School old boy Gary Brooker belting out his 1967 No1 classic 'A Whiter Shade of Pale' on Jools Holland's Annual Hootenanny. As the last note of 'Pale' sounded, on bound Jools to announce: "And later we are going to have Gary back singing the Blues." The symmetry of the connection was too significant to ignore. Something was telling me to check the result in black and white. I turned to text Page 308 – and there it was. Brighton 0 Southend 2. Deep joy and much punching of air. Of course, I had forgotten that being a Third Division match it probably didn't register with Sky. Somebody in their ivory tower there quite likely said: "Brighton – Southend? No one cares about the latest score from there, do they?" Anyway, no scoreflashes, hence my ignorance.

After the home disappointments over Christmas, it was a cracking win – a fact brought home during the near five-minute slot the game was given on ITV's Nationwide Football League Extra. If you follow the lower divisions, here is the programme not to miss each week. Our 'army' of fans – why only 375? - was shown in all its ecstatic glory after each goal. Or was that when they were cheering off a reportedly 'very upset' Nathan Jones. Meanwhile Seagulls follower Des Lynam was left looking sick up in the main stand. Credit to him, though. No bleats in a post-match interview. The pitch was the main attraction. A cross between a paddy field and Flanders field, close up you could see how lucky we were that ref Steve Baines had the bottle to give the game the go-ahead on such a bog. But, as the cliché goes, it was the same for both sides. And we hit them with two classic breaks. Scorers as at the Hall, in fact. A spokesman for Ecovert, the firm that runs the former Withdean athletics stadium, declared: "The pitch was never designed for League football. It's a piece of grass for people to throw javelins on." The definitive quote, though, was Webby's: "We scored two goals, they didn't score any." QED. Micky Adams was phlegmatic – as you'd expect from a man who has apparently left his wife and three kids fairly recently to tackle a 35-year-old oil executive in the penalty area!

The Withdean wipeout should have set us up perfectly for Kingstonian. But as we all know the script went somewhat awry. And what sickened clearly not only me more than defeat was seeing Leo lose his head yet again in another barmy display of immaturity that was possibly the key to our demise. The K player who clocked Ben Abbey, deliberately or otherwise, was already a dead duck in the ref's eyes well before Leo decided that nothing would be resolved unless he waded in. It was more than five seconds after the melee began that Leo even arrived on the scene. He pushed a K player over and that is what did for him. It was utterly mindless and the reason why he may well never get to play on the big stage that the talent he has deserves. I rate him our player of the season so far – when his brain is in gear and he is doing his job rather than niggling, shirt-pulling and trying to sort out strife that is nothing to do with him. We need Leo in our back-line, but now he will miss another three games for what was a violent conduct red card. Sort yourself out, son – before it's too late. Oh, and Bazza.....get lost!

As for the game, it was great for the media vultures who got their wish that a League club would end up looking silly. Mark Lawrenson – the man with the world's tightest wallet according to one of his exes – fancied we might fall. Which must be the first thing that dunderhead has ever got right. What's living in that moustache? K manager Geoff Chapple freely acknowledged we had them under the cosh for virtually the entire game. But pressure is no good without an end product – and we rarely looked like finding that elusive commodity. The best crosses come from the byline. Ask Barry Fry about Chelsea's. Currently, though, we seem to think they come from nearer the half-way line. Skipper Phil Whelan admitted our over-used long-ball policy was too 'predictable'. But does he ever think, as captain, about suggesting an alternative? Well done to K – for hanging on. I am sure they are as delighted as we would have been with a fourth-round trip to Bristol City!

APART from MC, Webby is clearly ready to cull the old guard - hence the 'surplus to requirements' tags stuck on Trevor Fitzpatrick, David Morley, Gary Cross etc and Mark Tinkler's exit for Hartlepool. I was stunned to see Gordon Connolly has scored twice in nine games for Carlisle, though I don't think he gave the Gunners too much bother. As for Scotty, at least he was brave enough to own up after knocking Northwich Victoria out of the Cup with his backside: 'There is some advantage to having a fat arse'.

Scotty, typically, also had one of his better games against us on Boxing Day. He provided the 90th-minute cross, cruelly fumbled by Darryl Flahavan under pressure from Damon Searle, that ended up in our net off Darryl's right foot. If the Os' Carl Griffiths is claiming that one, he is a bigger cheat than Maradona. He never got near it. We performed just as we did - or didn't - against Cheltenham. Their keeper had not a single worthwhile save to make and once again we blew a chance to impress in front of a big crowd. Elvis J. Eel made his home debut to an underwhelming reception. Tell me, is he really better than Sammy? Not that he was the only letdown apart from Blues. Premiership ref Graham Barber had a stinker. I also hope nobody followed the directions for Brighton given in the programme. They would have ended up at Gillingham!!! We owe Orient one, big time. So get on to Chris Berry now to book your coach seats for Brisbane Road. Usual numbers - 01702-558978 or 07703-898698. Only £7 for members? Unbeatable Mr G.

There is also a bargain buy in the offing for those superstars prepared to make the haul up to Darlington on Tuesday, February 6. The fare for that one will be a mere £10, with arrival back in Southend due around 4am! It's exhausting just thinking about it.

Not that winning in front of a large crowd necessarily gets us anywhere. Around 5,000 Blues 'fans' disappeared in the few days between us beating Canvey and turning in our best performance of the season so far against Third Division leaders Chesterfield. How could we be so good that day - in front of a stupendous 3,889 - and so relatively wretched in our next three home games? Nice to see so much backing given to Chesterfield when they were threatened with having three sides of their Saltergate ground shut by the Football Licencing Authority. The FLA - I wonder how many of their g and t jobsworths support Third Division clubs.

The Spireites looked a better side than Cardiff, but it took that cracking Rhys Weston own-goal in injury-time to give us a fully deserved point and silence the sheep-worriers. No sympathy at all for anyone who left early and missed it. Darryl Flahavan's penalty save capped another show which marked him out as a distinct improvement on Andy Woodman and if first halves could be cut back to 40 minutes we would probably be back in the First Division by now. How many presents have we handed out between 40 and 45 in recent seasons? The result puts us sixth, but with Cheltenham and Hartlepool much too close for comfort.

That leaves the visit of Torquay, just torn to shreds 5-0 by Blackpool. We played in the snow, the rest of the division opted not to bother. Looking back, we might have been better off doing the same. Blues chucked away two more points from a 1-1 contest we should have had sewn up by half-time. Carl Hutchings and Michael Black made tentative-looking starts, but welcome to both. Biggest disgrace of that day? Exeter calling off their match against Darlington at 12.45pm. Biggest joke of the day? The Hamsters' £200,000 underground heating system blowing a fuse.

JUST returning to the defeats by Orient and Kingstonian for a moment. Is there any Blues fan out there who did not take vicious stick after those catastrophes? Let me give you a trio of examples of the psychologically-damaging e-mails I received at the office. 1. From the C** U loser after Orient: "The joy of knowing how much you must have suffered in the 90th minute has made my Xmas complete." 2. From the never-sees-them-live Pompey/Saints 'fan' after Kingstonian: "Your load of useless tossers cost me £65 on a fixed-odds bet. What on earth was I thinking of?" 3. From the dangerously unstable Barnet nut: "A three-game ban for young Leo, is it? I bet the Kingstonian CD player got a bit of a hammering." At least we flushed his fixed-odds bet down the toilet as well. Shame!

Anyone wondering what Ron Martin has been up to in the last month? Quite a bit, kicking off with his Fossetts Farm public meeting at the Shrimpers Club on December 12, followed by the club AGM on the 14th and an appearance with Brian Moore on TalkSPORT the day after.

For details on the public meeting, see the slot Richard has found elsewhere on the site. The Fossetts plans were due for initial council consideration on February 7, but it appears they are not now on the agenda because of some 'unanswered questions'. Ron still claims there is no reason why they should not be studied. We await developments – as always – with a very keen interest. All we need to discover now is that Ron and Co are of the same ilk as Stephen Brown, the bloke who claimed he was ready to buy a six-figure, quarter stake in rock-bottom Carlisle and take over as owner from discredited Michael Knighton. Sadly he was 'unable to clarify his financial position' – i.e. he was possibly skint – and turned out to be a former barman in an Indian restaurant who drives a battered Vauxhall Cavalier and preferred to stay in a £50-a-night Travelodge rather than Carlisle's swishest hotel. He has also now disappeared to Spain.

Our pro-petition to counter the efforts of the so-called KARERS will be delivered, along with its 2,000-odd names, to the Director of Planning before that first council meeting. And Jerry Moss was due to attend the council-run 'Quality of Life' meeting in Southend on January 13 to urge those present to back the Fossetts project as part of the town regeneration plans.

The Trust intends to take up Ron's wish to meet with the committee as soon as is practical and Derek is at this moment looking to fix a date. I think we will have a few questions.....

I was not at the AGM, so cannot reveal what occurred. But Ron's radio appearance was entertaining, taking 40 minutes before a fan actually called from Southend. There were contributions from Lincoln, Hounslow, Crawley and Harlow on Blues, plus some bloke going on about how he prefers to go and watch Paris St Germain play at home. So what. Ron waxed lyrical on issues raised by callers as diverse as Martin Carruthers' wages, a possible club shop in Basildon, the abysmal state of the Hall 'burgers, having the shrimp incorporated on the shirt badge and the success of the free hats v Canvey. Then suddenly it was announced Alvin Martin was on the line. And no sooner had he ceased rambling about what might have been than John Main took over. He wanted to give fans 'the bigger picture' and explain that most of his problems were caused by having too many players at a Third Division club on First Division wages. Pity he couldn't have asked Alvin about that! At least we – and Scotty and Co – now know this problem is being addressed. As Ron announced: "Dave Webb's wage structure is endorsed by me."

At least Ron kept the Kingstonian prices regulation and the free entry for accompanied kids to see the LDV Vans date with Cambridge was also a step in the right direction. After seeing off Roy McFarland's men, could we be heading for the Millennium Stadium on two fronts? I suspect Bristol Rovers might have something to say about that. I see Morecambe were trying to screw £25 originally out of their supporters to watch Ipswich in the FA Cup. They must have had a hot-line to the Fat Controller at Canvey.

We may have let Kingstonian join the likes of Yeovil (twice), Aylesbury, Harlow and Doncaster as non-league clubs who have left us shame-faced by claiming our FA Cup scalp. But United did have one Cup-winner that weekend. Ron Pountney, fresh from picking up the £25,000 cheque from his testimonial, struck for Ford Sports Basildon in their 3-2 win over Woodham Town in the third round of the Essex County Veterans' Cup.

Talking of cash, I saw Leicester were allegedly about to offer Spud a new £1million-a-year contract. Strangely, that has gone a bit quiet since the 6-1 thrashing at Highbury.

Thanks to Bob Sills for informing me that the woman featured on the Sky TV ads that feature Roots Hall is the wife of David 'Spotter' Hancock, apparently a former joint-chairman of the old Supporters Club during the mid-80s. All very surreal.

Oy! If you owe Viki Brown parachute jump sponsorship cash, cough up. You know who you are, so deliver on your pledges.

Latest on liaison. Jeff Allen has been enjoying a nice trip to Nelson Mandela land, so that issue is now on the agenda for the committee's next meeting on January 29.

Stan. It is still not too late to come home. Latest options I have seen mooted vary between Paris St Germain, Sheffield United and.....Stafford Rangers!

Needless to say we are the best-supported club in Essex. Our average currently stands at 4,580, while that desperate crew up the A12 are attracting only 3,544 to their dismal fare.

AND finally, did you see that researchers in Holland have discovered that too much excitement and stress at football matches makes you more likely to peg out with a heart attack? If you are in a high-risk category – smoker, obese etc – they suggest you take an aspirin or beta-blocker before attending a game. They seem to have omitted that Southend's record under Alan Little should have been 50 per cent better than anywhere else. We might have had plenty of stress, but there was rarely much danger of any excitement. OK, that's yer lot. In fact, it's really too much.

NR (nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk - 14/1)

PS. 1. Any chance that Blues' less than testosterone-charged Hall performances of late could be because of a lack of Pulse Cheerleader sightings by the team pre-match?

2. Which is the most diabolical? When Saturday Comes or Escape to Victory?