

SUSCT NEWSLETTER 24

FOOTBALL is a funny old game, as Saint and Greavsie are thankfully no longer around to tell us. But it has indeed been proven to be so by what has happened to two men of the Hall in just the last few days.

Chris Powell would never profess himself one of the game's greats. He knows his strengths and limitations and plays to the limits of his capabilities in every match. Anything less than 100 per cent is out of the question. All Southend fans saw that during the 288 games he played for us in more than 5 years of faithful service with a smile. We got him on a free from Crystal Palace when he was on loan to Aldershot and no one begrudged him the step up the ladder he deserved when he left for Derby for £800,000 in January 1996. But Blues followers have long memories and Chris was still being hailed like one of us when he returned with Charlton for Ron Pountney's testimonial at the start of the season. You get back what you give – and Chris gave us a lot, on and off the pitch. His England call-up was a fitting tribute to a solid, no-frills performer who Sven Goran Eriksson could see, and Spain found out, was well able to handle the left-back role at the very highest level. Chris also managed to work 'exhilarating' and 'culminated' into his post-match interview, which definitely impressed me.

His career is still on the up even at 31. Would that we could still say the same about Leo Roget at just 23. Leo probably has more natural ability than Chris, but two more different characters you surely could not conjure up. Chris has knuckled down and worked to get where he is, while Leo seems to believe his path up the career ladder is a God-given right. His move from Southend should have been straight to a Premiership club. He is the right age and has all the talent. The problem is he has never been able to get his grey matter in gear and his reward for 123 outings in the colours has been a loan to desperate Stockport County. Wow! He said he was not interested in joining a Second or Third Division club as he continued to decline a new contract with us. But if he goes to Edgeley Park permanently, the Second looks like being what is on offer next season. Unless, of course, he decides he wants to settle a dispute with one of his new County team-mates by another laying on of hands. Then he will be straight out the door. You need aggression on the pitch, but antics like the Kingstonian craziness and going for Damon Searle against Halifax have done him untold harm rather than made him a hero. The truly big clubs need antics in that mould like a hole in the head. Watching scouts have surely taken note – and so, it would seem, has Webby.

I remember one of Leo's early games, possibly his debut, at Charlton in March 1996. He was tremendous in a great 3-0 win. Chris Powell had just left us by then, still playing in his usual calm, understated style. One looked destined for great things, the other to soldier on and fade away like yer ordinary, grass-roots pro. Who else, like me, got the two the wrong way round?

And look what Leo missed out on. A tremendous backroom effort ensured the white stuff did not scupper the Rochdale encounter and we once more demonstrated our preference for performing against sides near the upper end of the table. You got a warmer glow from the moment Jeff Allen announced the Pulse Cheerleaders would soon be back in the centre circle – conditions permitting. Dale for some reason – possibly his part in their 1-7 trouncing by Shrewsbury – opted to leave Simon Coleman on the bench. But once we had weathered nearly going two-down in 90 seconds, we looked a bit more up for it than of late on home soil. Phil Whelan found the net at last, while David Lee – apparently Dave Webb's lovechild according to ITV's Teletext – did not let a bit of recent stick hold him back from a spirited 90 minutes that brought him two deserved strikes. The back four – minus Stockport own-goal ace Leo, of course – showed something resembling its old solidity and Mark Rawle impressed on his first Hall showing. Tes Bramble did his best, but while he may have a big future I would suggest it is not on the left side of midfield. Paul Alcock clearly loves sending off keepers at our place, though it seemed from up in the East Green that Dale's Neil Edwards was very unlucky to see red. He looked to take the ball on the line of the area and only his momentum took him inches outside. It seems Alcock expected him to defy the laws of physics and the rest is history. Not our greatest show, but three points is what

counts – especially with Blackpool, Hull and Hartlepool next to be entertained at Roots. And at least Richard ‘Placido Domingo’ Coxell was able to exercise his vocal chords.....

I will return to the good and bad of our latest outings further on in NEWSLETTER NUMBER 24. But first I am sure there will be plenty of you salivating at the prospect of discovering what happened when your executive committee was granted an audience with our big white chief, Ron Martin, on February 21.

Sadly, a hefty night of European action meant I could not get time off to attend. But it appeared at the committee’s regular get-together six days later that my absence and inability to report on goings-on would not matter. For Ron had decreed the meeting to be ‘in camera’, ‘off-the-record’ or whichever such tag you care to choose. It was agreed that meekly accepting this was something of an error, to put it mildly, and should never be repeated in future. After all, the committee represents the Trust’s members and not just itself. Our members look for information through us. However, Paul FitzGerald ‘had a word’, Ron kindly had a rethink and suddenly the discussions were open to disclosure. So here, courtesy of Richard, is a rundown of most issues raised.

A slight ‘frisson’ was detected early doors, probably those last lingering mutual suspicions. But that passed and Ron declared himself still upbeat about the season and confident promotion remains a goer. The target is a return to the First Division a.s.a.p. – and so say all of us.

Opening item, naturally, was *Fossetts Farm* and concerns about the purchase of land there by South Eastern Leisure. Ron made it clear that any hold-up by Lansbury would merely leave them with something that was effectively worthless. No stadium, no development. However, if there is no deal on purchase, there could be delay of a year as the matter would then have to be referred for a possible Compulsory Purchase Order.

The key date at present remains March 7, when Ron felt happy planning consent for the stadium would be granted. So by the time you read this, we should know where we stand and what the next steps will be. Ron insisted, pressed by Paul FitzGerald, that extra information the council requested had been supplied, they had not asked for more and we are looking for a straight ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. Personally, I see it more as we are praying for a ‘Yes’. Our ‘pro’ petition will be handed in before the meeting gets under way.

United’s *finances* are currently built around a series of ifs, buts and maybes. If the Fossetts plans develop into the real deal, though, and the stadium is built, our present debt will be paid off and the football club will then be obliged to operate as profitably as it can. That would not be helped by our remaining in the Third Division! The smoke appears around issues such as would we rent the stadium, how much that might cost, would there be additional profit from the development etc. Should the phrase ‘pear-shaped’ suddenly become the vogue and we have to look to remain at Roots Hall, our debts will remain and we will simply be left trying to stay afloat. Is that a serious option? Errrr.....

Ron said he would follow up the delay in the transfer of SUFC shares to the Trust courtesy of Paul and this has now gone ahead. He believes fan purchase of *shares* (£7 each in minimum blocks of 10) is a good idea. {The Trust has no plans to purchase shares at present, following an 8-2 committee vote against. But we would not advise against individual members buying should they so wish – as long as they remember that at present they will not make a bean and are strictly for the long term. Other current Trust investment possibilities are under review.}

RON remains cool towards SUSCT membership on the *board*. In fact, he said ‘No’. He appears to smell a fifth columnist. But when it was pointed out it was a Taylor Report recommendation, was excellent PR, would get national coverage, would give us no power and our representative would be tied by confidentiality like any other board member, he agreed to think about it and discuss it with the board.

Terracing at Fossetts has Ron’s sympathy and it clearly got a pro vote on the excellent Coxell poll on the Trust website (www.susc.co.uk) , results of which are now with the football club. While many fans want the North Bank back, few want to surrender the South Upper – and neither does the Trust. We suggest the north-west

section of the North Stand for away fans – other than against opposition such as Leyton Orient, Cardiff, Brighton etc.

We let Ron know that we were not happy with how SUSCT sponsorship of the Halifax match had gone, what with our ad missing from the programme, no tannoy announcements etc. We have had an apology from United, an acceptance mistakes were made and action to remedy our hurt has been undertaken. Hope you saw Paul's excellent colour ad in the Rochdale programme.

SUSCT fund-raising activity within the environs of Roots Hall is a future possibility, though Ron did not enthuse over discounts for members in the club shop.

United's new ticketing system will go live on March 21, which will with luck enable considerable improvements to be made. Not difficult it would appear when it took three days to print all the Canvey tickets using the current methods.

Ron is happy to provide further travel subsidy should the occasion merit it. We would suggest this would include the LDV Vans Trophy final if we make it to Cardiff. We also asked for more notice should a specific fixture be judged worthy of Ron's munificence.

We got a curt response to suggestions of a possible lack of professionalism within SUFC. Ron will not accept that. His view is that there has been a steady improvement off the field since he assumed control, but there is still more to be done.

A request for a 'no smoking' area in the East Stand will be looked into. I had a feeling one had to be provided in every stand these days for those of us too young to die, but will rely on Ron to find out.

Food continues to have a number of people steaming on questions of quality, price and supply. Gordon Harrold had done a memo to Ron defending his position, but Ron will now take up our concerns with Gordon. Will he give him a grilling?

On the subject of the Leyton Orient tickets fiasco, Ron will suggest a £1,000 donation to Little Havens hospice from Barry Hearn to make up for the treatment many of our supporters endured at Brisbane Road back in January. Numerous fans stuck on the terrace with seat tickets simply no longer have their stubs with which to get a £4 refund.

And that, it seems, was that. It was a full and frank meeting and Ron dealt with the points put to him in a professional manner, as you would expect. We believe the get-together was worthwhile and also necessary so that both parties know exactly where the other stands. The next such meeting will be on a date presently vague to say the least. The committee also agreed that there may also be occasions when we might need to try to meet with other football club representatives whose expertise could possibly more easily resolve certain queries or issues.

OK, back to recent triumphs – and disasters. At least Leo left us, even if it proves temporarily, with one positive memory. His 110th-minute LDV Vans Trophy Southern Section semi-final golden goal winner against Swindon was a classic header, topped off by a whirling dervish and shirt-removing routine that showed the brain cells had once again short-circuited. But I am still not sure he was quite as animated as the normally sedate St John's Ambulance squad on duty in front of the East Stand, who leaped from their bench baying for blood when Tes was brought down in the bearhug that saw Mark Robinson sent off. Keep it up, lads – and lose a stone, Robbo!

It was heartbreaking that Swindon chairman Terence Brady was made to look a complete LDV arse, having to cancel his suite and 40-room booking at a Cardiff hotel. And what about their boss Andy King's pathetic ravings after the final whistle. He declared: "The referee won that game for them (that's us). The referee

cheated and made bad decisions. He done (did?) my boy for diving when it was a clear penalty. I don't take that as a defeat. The ref must have had Southend on fixed odds or something. The conditions were atrocious, Robinson's challenge wasn't harsh, he didn't deserve to go off. I feel sorry for my chairman, he had a few suites booked for the Millenium Stadium." Took defeat well, didn't he?

It would have been nice to have read those quotes in any daily newspaper next morning. But I am afraid not even SunSport rates the LDV Vans Trophy worthy of coverage until – possibly – the stage of the two Section finals. My moans in the office simply bring good-natured smiles that say 'He really IS totally tonto'. Still, if you are unhappy with the contempt with which the lower divisions are treated in general by the national media, do as Martin Penton has done. Write in and complain. It may get you nowhere, but any efforts to press the message that the whole nation is very definitely NOT addicted solely to the Premiership has to be worthwhile. Our Swindon triumph managed a mention on Radio 5 Live's early morning show, thanks to a special request from someone whose name I did not catch. Sadly, it was given in the usual patronising 'let's joke this up' way that you expect from a station where most presenters seem to have their heads so far up their own backsides I would be surprised if they ever see daylight.

Next it is Brentford, first leg at home on March 13 when away might have been best. And if the Bees play as they did in their recent televised 1-0 defeat at Millwall, then we have a test on our hands. Should we perform over the two-leg finale as we did against the Shaymen, then we know we can forget any thought of revenge for our Leyland Daf Cup defeat back in '91.

OUR SUSCT sponsorship against Halifax brought no more success on the pitch than off it. Dire does not seem too unkind a word to describe the performance. Even Webby agreed. The question is why? Halifax were another set of strugglers who came to the Hall and made mugs of us. For me, only Kevin Maher – now boasting the Third Division's second-worst disciplinary record of 1 red card and 11 yellows – did himself justice. When we twice got round the back of their defence, we almost scored on both occasions. When we lumped it down the middle, we offered about as much threat as Graham Norton offers Caprice. Skipper Phil Whelan said in his 'Captain's Log': "The manager has gone through one or two things in training on how we might break defensive teams down and we will be putting these into practice against the Yorkshire outfit." We must have missed them. It was horror fare for the 20 guests up in our executive suite as we slipped out of the top seven to a chorus of mostly complete cobblers from the managerial know-alls around the ground.

Just to rub it in on the day, Mark Tinkler headed a goal from six yards for Hartlepool. Blimey, he never used to get in the opposition area when he was with us.

Kidderminster and Scunthorpe were journeys I was unable to make. The home fans' roar that greeted Kiddie's winner was almost matched in my office as the usual jeers and ripostes flashed around. Hugely depressing. After we had led at half-time, the result just seemed to have that awful air of inevitable disappointment about it once they levelled. Still, at least Michael Black got off the mark which should enhance his confidence.

He performed encouragingly at Glanford Park as well by all accounts, though not quite nipping in quickly enough to nick our goal off David Lee. Massive respect to the Scunthorpe keeper for flapping the ball down and goalwards when Lee's shot looked to be heading over the top. Again, though, we failed to hold a lead and it cost us a return to the play-off slots.

Another mention for Mark Rawle, who made his first appearance at Scunny. Presumably we only splashed an alleged £60,000 on the proviso some cash is about to come in. We wait to see who that is for, though the usual suspects (Carruthers, Roget etc, etc) do not take much pinning down. Yeovil have also been quite active in the market of late, possibly suggesting one or two of their players could be out the door come the season's end. I wonder to where.....

HERE'S hoping we picked up something at York and we can leapfrog a dangerous-looking Blackpool. Barnet is a must Blue Army trip, so book your coach seats with Chris Berry now on 01702-558978 or 07703-898698.

Likewise for the LDV second leg at Brentford on March 20. A nice first-leg lead should help swell numbers. And don't forget that match is ALL-TICKET for United supporters. A trip to Cardiff for the final would be fantastic for United's profile and rest assured we are already making Trust travel plans. Once again, though, we have to report some recent unacceptable behaviour. It is invariably 'pop'-related and my advice is simple. If you cannot get by without a drink – get help. Regrettably, we feel a new code of conduct warning will have to be distributed shortly. We want nothing to spoil the enjoyment of the vast majority of our faithful travellers – especially as six of United's last nine games are away and the team will need all the backing they can get.

Craig Fillary reports our finances still in good order, while our membership should soon hit the 600-mark. Tremendous, with clear potential for Paul FitzGerald to be given even more work depending on results.

We are trying to track down the young lad hit by the ball when Macclesfield keeper Tony Bullock booted the ball into the crowd on being sent off during the Hall clash last November. The idea is to offer him a free trip with us to the return game on April 21 and show that, hopefully, his unfortunate experience was a one-off.

The next Trust QUIZ NIGHT is all set for after the Blackpool game. Three points followed by an easy night on the scoring will suit me. Anyone not taking part, you have missed some fine raffle prizes – including pairs of match tickets and the signed match ball from our sponsored Halifax disaster, which has become slightly more valuable having been kicked once by Martyn Booty. Well done, once again, to Donna for all her hard work. And also to Guy Rickard for the time and effort he puts into getting the quiz ready. We hope our Player of the Season awards night in the Shrimpers Club will be on May 2 this year. Martin Penton is running that again, with his main task at present being trying to get the trophy back from Nathan Jones.

A 'sorry' from the Trust committee here for an unfortunate oversight. We were not represented at the cremation of former United president John Woodcock, when we should have been. As the family requested, we have sent a donation in his memory of £50 to the St Mary's Church Fund.

WHILE United's fortunes continue to hover on a knife-edge, Delancey Estates seem to be doing very nicely thank you. Their share price is up around 25 per cent since December. The sale, worth £14million to the company, of its joint venture with car dealer Dixon Motors must have helped and as 'Midas' said in the Financial Mail on Sunday: ".....at 108.5p, the shares have further to go." I wonder how many people they tell that Blues are part of their portfolio.

Has anyone had the misfortune to listen to Mark Bright and Ian Wright on the radio on a Saturday morning? I would describe the show with this rhyming name – Bagof *****. When are radio and TV going to give us an independent voice of reason in football, someone sane and unafraid to criticise the game wherever necessary, rather than keep feeding us a diet of ex-pros and hangers-on whose sole modus operandi is to kiss a**e and tell us how fantastic everything and everyone is in the game? The LDV Vans semi-final draw was rather important to us, yet trendy Soccer AM entrusted it to some gormless git named Wayne Hemingway (who?), whose attempt at humour by constantly dropping the team cards was one of the most cringe-making and embarrassing acts of cretinism I have ever had the misfortune to witness. Talking of Soccer AM, well done to Rob Newman for an entertaining appearance and beating the Fat Cat from the spot.

A quick look back to NEWSLETTER NUMBER 23 with a small apology. It was, in fact, rather like the old Access card – your flexible friend. An unintended transposition of pages after printing meant that what should have been Page 2 suddenly became Page 5. Fortunately, it all still read fairly seamlessly so you may not have noticed anything wrong at all. Better luck this time.

I see 'Kevin Maher' has been doing a bit more film watching. Just about every review of 'Dude, Where's My Car?' rated it around 90 minutes of total trash for the mentally unbalanced. Not our Kev writing in The Face, though. He simpered: "Strippers, gay aliens and stoner dogs.....how could you not love this movie?" Quite easily, it would sound.

Anyone tried QuizMatch? I gave up after going round and round on United's website.

Best wishes to Scott Forbes for a continuing recovery. I would not wish appendicitis on anybody, but think the break from action will have done this game trier good. And, of course, farewell Fitz. A pity it never worked out. He looked so promising scoring both goals in the 2-2 draw with the Os in October 1998, but the pounds went on during his lengthy injury absence and he returned never looking as dangerous again. Shame.

A huge thank you to Mark Merry for boosting Trust funds by £50, his winning bid for the 1979 Southend v Liverpool FA Cup programme so kindly donated by Derek Gibson. Star men.

Right, finis. We'll cover York, any Fossetts decision and its repercussions, Blackpool, Brentford home and away, Barnet, Hull, Chesterfield, the next committee meeting on April 2, Darlington and whatever else there is room for in NUMBER 25.

Any comeback, complaints etc, just dial up nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk

NR (5/3).

PS. Nice to see the newsletter quoted in the Echo. Do I get a credit or lineage for that?