

SUSCT NEWSLETTER 39

WHAT an eye-opener the one pre-season friendly I managed to attend, against Charlton, proved to be. Everyone sat near my seat in the East Stand - well, I assume it was mine as the numbers had still not been painted on - seemed to be saying the same thing. The squad has clearly been boosted by some top-quality signings, there is the right blend of youth and experience, the all-round movement looks excellent and the new kit is a big plus. If they can keep up that level of performance, then a fantastic 2002-03 lies ahead for all Blues supporters.

Right, that's the update on the Pulse Cheerleaders. So what about the boys in that drabbest of navy blue? I understand sweatshops worldwide have been hammering out the new garb at record rates, so much so that quality control is occasionally a little lacking and stocks of some sizes have already run out. Pre-Charlton I had only just walked into the car park before I was accosted by a fellow committee member heading for the club shop to return a £40 shirt (actual cost probably nearer £4), whose white piping was already beginning to come unthreaded from the main fabric. Let's hope every other purchaser is having better luck - assuming you can purchase in the first place.

As for that game, surely we might as well be honest. It was pretty desperate fare for the 2,000 or so present - of which at least 600 must have been 'Addicks' followers - in steamy conditions. Nothing much seemed to have changed from last season. Crosses got us panicky, the midfield gave no support to the frontmen, Steven Clark's confidence looked non-existent, the 'lump' was still sadly in evidence, Richards was out injured, etc, etc. Sorry Rob, it was more than the hot weather to blame for our just about total lack of threat. The constant catchphrase is 'We must learn from this'. Worryingly, we don't seem to be! Still, as long as the boss has it right by 3pm, August 10, no one will mind. The gloom merchants are already emerging from the woodwork, though. Mr G has predicted 16th place and is once more refusing to attend the Hall again until we string three successive league wins together. And this is a man you ignore at your peril. A year ago he announced to a doubting world: "There will never be a new stadium at Fossetts Farm as long as my **** points downwards." Yea verily, Nostradamus has a rival.

Remember, though, that last season our pre-campaign record was pretty good. This season, apart from sticking four in the Burnham Ramblers onion bag, routing Chelmsford and, so I hear, the odd moments against the Hamsters, it has been pretty mediocre. Oddly, Rob seemed most pleased by our washout defeat against the Dons. The Hall is waterlogged, Boots and Laces isn't. What's going on there? Quite simply, let us pray we are holding back our best for the serious stuff - chasing that top three slot and ensuring that this time round my annual £5ew, on at 25s, ends up costing Mr Coral £150-plus.

Had to miss the Hamsters date because of work - plus the fact I suffer a severe allergic reaction whenever I am in the presence of pretend Blues fans come to gawp at Premiership posers. Judging by a crowd of nearly 9,000, there were plenty of them about. Nor could I face the prospect of that gross lump of sweaty lard from Bad Manners strutting his stuff again as he did in such embarrassing fashion some months back. Did they perform the song they were supposed to be writing about the club? The Trust was asked if we would like to sponsor it, with a figure of around £1,000 mentioned. Guess what our response was. Talking of the Roeder brigade, I trust we have made them pay dear for staging some pre-season non-event against Vitesse Arnhem on our hallowed green sward. What was wrong with their cabbage patch?

The Open Day went pretty well for the Trust on July 21 and a massive thank-you to all those who turned out to help make the event a success. We reckon we made about £400 for club funds, some of that from the auction of Stephen Broad's shirt. Stephen was the player whose shirt we sponsored last season and young Daniel Armstrong was happy to leave for home with that prize piece of kit. Mike Smith's gazebos were excellent, Paul Yeomanson's banners stunning and Chris Berry and the SJS deservedly also had a very good day. Terry also enrolled nine new members, so welcome aboard to them, and we made a few bob from the raffle. Such a shame I did not get to hear Bell and Sturling (who?) 'singing' Goldenballs and Sven, Sven, Sven. Brian Wheeler rated

their warbling 'the icing on the cake'. Or should that have been cack? Plus there was the public rebirth of Sammy the Shrimp. Most people seem to feel Sammy Mk II is a major improvement on the irradiated pink monster, sadly missed by Mr I. Sammy, of course, now proudly carries the letters 'SUSCT' on the back of his shirt by way of a receipt for our input into the cost of putting him together. Apparently HM the Queen was gagging to meet him at a recent mascots' jamboree she attended (yes, really) at Pride Park, Derby. But only Elvis J Eel was present and Liz, I hear, left well unhappy.

OF course, the Open Day also saw our new big-name sponsors revealed. But the secret was out a week early and they turned out to be neither big nor a name. As no one would cough the sort of dosh we were seeking, a certain Martin Dawn plc stepped into the breach. There has to be a catch here somewhere. Has Ron(ald) won the lottery? At least we have been reassured that those horrendous figures released by Deloitte and Touche showing us £4million in debt are all a thing of the past, referred to 2000-01 and everything on the financial front is now looking a lot perkier. (Our father, which art in heaven, etc etc). Turnover is up 53 per cent to £2.87m, the third-best in our division, and most of our debt is now 'soft'. Only one problem. The lease on the Hall still runs out next March. But never fear. Ron(ald) declared: "I don't think anyone should concern themselves over the lease. No one is proposing the club gets thrown out of Roots Hall." Phew, we can all sleep a lot easier in our beds after that.

The committee met last on July 16. The plastic seat purchase has gone through and it was nice to see the ball boys looking so comfortable against Charlton.

One bit of bad news, though. The 92 clubs in 92 hours fund-raiser that Kevin Feasey has worked so hard to get off the ground has had to be abandoned because the insurance costs are simply prohibitive. This is a blow both to the Trust, because it could have made us some serious coins, and to Kevin, who did all he could to push the project forward. Our financial position remains sound and the next meeting, on August 19, will decide where our player sponsorship should go this season and which United projects might best benefit from the cash we have to offer. Paul FitzGerald had one particularly interesting idea.....

Unfortunately, Kevin has also had to relinquish his role as our liaison officer with the club, a job he has done very successfully. His new work role makes it impossible for him to continue, though he will remain as our fund-raising 'brain'. Dave Scriven is stepping into the liaison role, with other committee members to partner him at meetings as required.

Bramble goes for £5.5million. It's enough to have Ron(ald) leaping around stark naked on the Hall centre circle. Sadly, wrong Bramble. Titus, not Tes, has headed for Geordieland. But at least that should show Bramble snr what just might be possible with the maximum effort - and at least 20 goals - this season. Our club supremo can keep his clothes on - for the time being.

But, praise be, we have been in the market again - though not for the now sadly unwanted Leo. All the best to Graeme Jones. He has been a proven goalscorer - so let's hope that 'has been' reference is the only one that need be applied to him. OK, he scored 32 for Wigan in 1996-97. So what. He bagged only seven for St Johnstone last season. Even so, at our level he should not be finished at 32 and we certainly need a bit of proven experience up front to link with the wannabes.

Interesting to see that Blues have a new member of their serious crimes squad. Following the distinguished example set by ex-boss Alvan Williams (manslaughter) and dreadlocked crowd-pleaser Ricky Otto (armed robbery), we now have David Roche. A £40,000 capture from Doncaster in the mid-90s, we perhaps never saw the best of him in a very brief stay at the Hall as he preferred to channel his aggression into activities back in his native north-east patch rather than into the midfield arena. Blues said a 'fond' farewell following court action for a knife attack on a rival and the slight fitness problem caused when someone decided to operate on his right knee with a sawn-off shotgun. Unfortunately, such drastic surgery does tend to impair mobility on a long-term basis. Anyway, David has just been involved in a £500,000 transfer. Unfortunately for him and his 20-odd compadres, this involved drugs and not a move, for which misdemeanour he is now settling into an impressive eight-year stretch at her maj's pleasure. Pure Ecstasy!

DON'T forget a couple of fixture alterations. The home clash v Hartlepool has been brought forward a day from Saturday October 26 to Friday October 25 because of an England Euro 2004 qualifier and the Boxing Day clash at Cambridge now kicks off at 1pm instead of 3pm. Have your cold turkey - that's whatever is left of the Christmas bird, not heroin withdrawal symptoms - when you get home.

If your membership is up for renewal, do Terry a favour and sort it out before the big kick-off. After that, hopefully, we will have hordes of prospective new members flocking to sign on the dotted line and he will be overwhelmed. Post all your bits and pieces to Terry Jeffreys, 32 Herondale, Basildon, Essex. SS14 1RR. Remember that signing up also makes it so much easier - and cheaper - for you to travel away.

Talking of which, Berry's Travel rumbles back into action on August 10, when we make the daunting trip to Hull for our first league fixture of the season. This will be a major test of our promotion credentials, as the Tigers have been flashing their wad again big time. Cost is £20 for members, £30 for those with more money than sense. Contact Chris to book your Supreme seat on 01702-558978 or 07703-898698 - NOW! Hull are offering a £2 discount if you buy your match ticket from the Hall, which you might like to consider. And don't forget to collect your United season ticket, if you have bought one, from the club shop - using Geoffrey King's missive as proof of ID.

Ronnie Whelan is back by the seaside. Fortunately, not at Southend. His old Anfield buddy Steve McMahon has found an opening for him with Blackpool. Presumably, close to some 'refreshment'.

So how the mighty are fallen. Darryl has decided to sign a new 12-month contract after finding that, after all, there was not a veritable host of big clubs vying for his company. Like numerous other lower division players, he has had to come face to face with the new reality and discovered the grass is no longer so green on the other side. A salutary lesson for the entire squad, I should think. What we want now is Darryl back to his fully committed best - not fearful, as well, of coming for those crosses outside the six-yard box - and we will again have a keeper we can genuinely rely on. Oh, and keep your zip done up!

The transfer windows? Another European-inspired piece of goonery that may go down well with Sepp Blatter and his collection of corrupt cronies, but which sucks yet more lifeblood from those whose continued existence in these troubled times can easily depend on the ability to sell a player from one month to the next. In fact, just about every club in the Nationwide League. Is anyone surprised that the FA have gone along with it? No, the Premiership will be able to cope, ergo, all is well. Wake up, Crozier, and come out of your ivory tower. Before it is too late.

Likewise, more Sven-inspired drivel about the 'winter break'. Perhaps someone could tell me when we last had a winter. I mean one like 1962-3, when the third round of the FA Cup started on January 5 - with only three games played - and ended in mid-March thanks to snow by the shed load for weeks on end. The reason why they pack up for four weeks in Germany or Poland is because most of their grounds are buried under four feet of the white stuff - and I don't mean Colombian marching powder. Our grounds these days see a light dusting maybe once in a blue moon any time between November and early April. And I am sick of hearing about 'tired' players. These mostly £20,000-a-week minimum so-called Premiership 'stars' are cracked up to be superfit professional sportsmen. Yet they cannot hack maybe two games a week where they spend most of the time wandering around the pitch doing absolutely nothing. Tired is part and parcel of life at the top - ask an entrant in something like the Tour de France. Oh, hang on, David Dein is in favour. That's all right then. It must be a good thing. And he says some of those who normally watch Premiership matches might decide to watch some Nationwide games while the break is in force. Well, thanks a lot David old son. But I think you will find that down in the depths, where the name of the game is loyalty, the last thing we want are a few of your 'here today, gone tomorrow' followers doing us a favour. Stuff your patronising where the sun don't shine and let some of the air out of your inflated ego.

OUR efforts at the Football League's anti-Carlton/Granada protest certainly worked a treat - not! Those voices present for United were, as it has turned out, just whistling in the wind as the High Court decided that the £131.9million still owed to the Nationwide clubs did not have to be paid thanks to a contractual 'oversight'.

Anyone still find that pathetic monkey funny? At least we will be able to see our Nationwide battlers on the box again next season thanks to Sky. But if the League had possessed any sense, they would never have rejected Sky's original bid to take up the pie-in-the-sky ITV Digital offer in the first place - an offer that has turned out to be catastrophic for a number of clubs.

Not that it is easy sympathising with so-called businessmen like former Bradford City chairman Geoffrey Richmond, who wonders why his club is going down the toilet after handing a fly-by-night like Benito Carbone a £40,000-a-week, five-year deal. A deal dependent on TV money the club then never got. Yes, the Richmonds of this world makes Ron(al)d look like a veritable financial sage.

And it is no good the League's top brass welcoming Sky back and saying now how great they are. What they should be explaining is their own incompetence, which has left them punching the air with joy at accepting an offer of £95million for four years that is WORSE than Sky's original deal before the Digi mob moved in. No wonder football's finances are in chaos. Not, of course, that that is why some First Division clubs are unhappy with the new TV contract. Greedmeisters like Simon Jordan of skint Palace, where financial dealings over the last couple of years (remember Goldberg and Tel?) have made as much sense as the ramblings of a certified lunatic, reckon there should have been even more in the pot - but only, of course, for them! Ditto Millwall's Theo Paphitis.

Yet while Nationwide League income seems on a constant downward spiral, there is at least one financial consideration in the game that never appears to go any other way than up, up, up - Gordon Taylor's wages. The PFA chief's salary has soared from £319,671 last year to £484,135 this year, making him surely the fattest of the fat cats this typically champagne socialist would normally be disparaging. The 600-odd out-of-contract players with little future in the game are entitled to ask what he now plans to do for them, other than wring his hands, to show he merits such a wad. They might also like to ring Mr Bosman and thank him for getting them bombed out. There had to be victims of the European Court ruling in his favour - and, as ever, they are at the game's basement.

Back to the World Cup for a minute. It is always entertaining to see all the club colours and team names on flags surrounding any ground where England play. I hate to admit that one from the worst club in the world was frequently prominent on TV out in the Far East. But our Blue boys were represented at the tournament as well - thanks to United and Republic of Ireland fan Brian Sheridan from Dublin, whose Irish tri-colour proudly proclaimed 'Southend United Supporters Club, Dublin Branch'. Brian's creation was clearly difficult to spot as not even his wife caught a glimpse, even though he was at every Irish match in Japan and South Korea. He met up with fellow Greens from West Brom, Huddersfield, Burnley and even the dreaded Cardiff and, with the word spread, there should now be plenty of Nipponese and dog devourers this season yelling: Come on you Brues! Next stop for Brian and his flag is Moscow in September. Great work, mate.

Living in Hadleigh, I am right behind the fight to prevent the building of another McDonald's saturated fat emporium on a local derelict garage site. With the nation suffering rampant obesity, the last thing we need is any more of these hell holes of crap cuisine fronted by that cretinous clown. I drove to York six weeks or so ago and the total way along the A-road route all you see if you fancy a snack are McDonald's and Little Chefs. They spread like bacteria. So forgive me if, as a season ticket holder, I totally reject the offer arranged through United to turn a Medium Extra Value Meal into a Large Extra Value Meal any time I happen to be passing one of those palaces of the culinarily challenged. Frankly, I would rather starve. All power to Michael Moore on this one.

TALKING of burgers, news of an ex-Blue who made them part of his staple diet - Paul Byrne. The Irishman, still only 30, has been warned to get himself into shape if he is to have any hope of landing a contract with.....Kildare County! That, apparently, is where you head next after being released by Bohemians. It seems Byrne played for Kildare in a recent friendly against Glebe North and was found to be 'off the pace'. No-nonsense Kildare boss Dermot Keely declared: "Paul is in last chance saloon now and has to realise that. I am a great believer in his ability. But, in my opinion, there is no such thing as a fat footballer - and I am certainly not going to sign one." Knowing Byrne, he probably hopes the last chance saloon is an offshoot of Churchill's.

Is Kevin Maher the right new captain? He is less of a fist-shaker than Phil Whelan, if that is possible. Why not test for the squad's best Roy Keane impersonator and give him the armband?

Wimbledon at home in the one-leg Worthington Cup first round. Totally underwhelming.

Best joke I've heard this season. Joe Ross is being elevated to the Premiership. Come to think of it, what a good idea.

OK, time to close. Any comeback, for any of the usual reasons, contact me at the normal venue - nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk All the best to all our members for the new season. We deserve a good'un - and at least we are already four points clear of Boston!

NR (4/8).

PS 1. This month's quiz questions, to which I may, for legal reasons, be unable to give answers. a) Which current member of the United staff is nicknamed: 'Stab in the back'? b) Which first-team squad member has a parent allegedly linked to the illicit narcotics trade?

2. The Trust was very sorry to hear of the death of Thomas Greer. Thomas, who lived in Eastwood was one of our veterans. Member number 302, he would have been 85 this month. Our condolences to his family.