

SUSCT NEWSLETTER No

43

PIG sick. Yes, I've that old familiar feeling as I pen these first two paras immediately after returning via Chris Berry Coaches from watching United's and our FA Cup fantasies exploded for another season. Bournemouth had just that little bit too much for us second half and not even the full-voiced backing of a 554-strong Blue Army could lift the lads enough to get us level and earn a tilt at extra-time.

But I will have to come back to the action later, as newsletter rewrites are out of the door this close to the Christmas deadline. So, read on.....

There it was in black and white: 'Supporters may not have trusted previous management, but they can trust me'. Thus spake Zarathustra. Well, not quite. It was the somewhat less exotic Ron Martin in the Bournemouth FA Cup programme, querying the fans' cynicism over lack of revelations concerning what was happening to the Roots Hall lease from next March.

Then, lo and behold, the lease is extended for three more years to sighs of relief all round - followed soon after by the inevitable questions as to the actual truth of United's current situation and whether Fossetts Farm is now once more a real possibility or still a KARER-blighted piece of pie in the sky.

SEL, Martin Dawn plc, Delancey Estates. None have exactly endeared themselves to the faithful, to put it mildly. But while we appear to owe SEL £400,000 a year in rent and yet somehow no money ever appears to change hands, maybe we do have a sugar daddy. With big teeth, though. As for Ron's words, they will be burned into our consciousness. I wonder if he has ever told any other group the same thing about 'trust' during his business career.....We desperately want to believe, yet that cynicism is sure to linger until the first pile of our new home is driven into the earth. The time for promises is over.

Paul FitzGerald, as ever, put our views across on the current situation more than adequately in the Evening Echo in the wake of Ron / SEL successfully winning that 36 months of extra-time at Roots and doing a fresh 'deal' with Lansbury, who own 80 per cent of the Fossetts Farm site. The plan for Fossetts now envisages a new Blues multi-purpose stadium with leisure facilities etc plus a B & Q next door, which will be handy should any bits start falling off our state-of-the-art abode. All we need is council backing / planning permission, a fair wind and to win any war with the forces of darkness beginning with 'K'. Yet the potential dodginess of the finances and the thought that Blues could be lumbered with a new venue weighed down by already in-situ debt remain. For now, it is a simple case of not counting those chickens just yet. One issue, though, already under discussion is a Q & A on the latest position – provisional date early January – so watch out for further details as they arise.

Paul has also spoken to both Lansbury's Mark Stolkin and Ron, who seem quite happy with how things are panning out. (Who said 'Well, they would be, wouldn't they?'). He also plans to talk to Colin Wagman over whatever future 're-financing' is going to be necessary at United.

Certainly the money men and our good selves could possibly allow one small sneaky smile following Southend council's development control committee's decision on December 11 to give the green light to Lansbury for the B & Q part of the development. This was crucial. And though Deputy PM 'Two Jags' Prescott has to give approval, this *is not expected* to be a problem. The Tories and Lib-Dems appear to be falling into line and only two members of the Cherie Appreciation Society (somebody called Dennis Garne representing the Kursaal and A. N. Other) voiced objections under the watchful eye of our secretary Terry Jeffreys and the voice of youth Dave Scriven. Labour and their KARERS friends appear to favour a hospital

extension on Fossetts, though few others appear to carer too much for that wheeze and reckon any new hospital buildings might be better on whatever is left when the Hall is levelled. A true tonic.

But I'll leave the final word to Deep Throat, venturing forth momentarily from deep in the bowels to contact me again via his chief Prophet of Doom. The message is short, but simple. The organ grinders are losing faith in the monkeys and a new broom might sweep more sweetly. Make of that what you will.....Along with the fact we are allegedly 50-1 with Chelsea to go bankrupt in the not too distant future. Keep smiling!

What remains guaranteed is SUFC need every penny they can get from whatever source, which probably explains why the move back to the North Bank has been quietly laid to rest once more. That is £15,000 saved for a start. A song and dance was made, but in the end only 77 people could be arsed to reply to United via the programme. Meanwhile, the Trust cut-out slip in NEWSLETTER NUMBER 41 hardly had members breaking a world record to get their scissors out.

The club did its best and now the way forward might be for us to join the burgeoning national bandwagon seeking a return to safe standing at grounds up and down the country and trying to get that built into the Fossetts plans. That, of course, would be irrespective of current 'Football League rules', the platitudes on the subject from mealy-mouthed government hacks and all United references to 'safe environments' and 'encouraging families'. As Tim in The Office might say: 'C**k!'

The general view at the last committee meeting on December 9 is that some luminaries seem to see a way to come out of this with a few bob in their pockets. Our job is to try to see that the United finances do not finish belly-up so that those same persons can benefit at United's expense.

A busy gathering, one I was sadly unable to attend because of work, considered a number of other pertinent issues. Terry reported on his discussions with Football Direct, the supreme body for supporters club trusts all over the UK.

Our 'case worker' – sounds horribly like Social Services – declared himself more than satisfied with the SUSCT's progress, particularly as regards our membership figure (672 plus 137 SJS) in relation to United's average gate (currently 3,803), our liaison links with United and our match sponsorship v Boston. The advice was to keep up that good work and to continue pushing for the elusive seat on the board. One day, eh. He also suggested we might consider switching from being a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) to an Industrial and Provident Society. But going into that any further will probably do our heads in, so we will leave it for Terry to pursue in his usual vigorous manner.

One thing is for sure, we do not want to stand still on the issue of membership recruitment. Mike Smith gave details of an enlightening little survey on what he had discovered, talking to a small cross-section of supporters before the home Bournemouth Cup clash and quizzing others on www.shrimperzone.com, were the reasons why some people would not, did not or could not join the Trust. Views expressed came from both members and non-members alike.

Of those polled, a staggering 35 per cent – presumably non-members – claimed not to know what the SUSCT stands for and what it does. Yet you can go on the internet for information, we have a page in every home programme, get tannoy publicity for the Player of the Month, Christmas Draw etc and are usually quoted in the local press on any sufficiently crucial issues concerning the football club.

United reckon to sell 1,300 programmes per-game. Don't those people who buy them read them? Clearly not, as one suggestion was 'In the old days, the SUSC had a decent spread in the programme. Can't the club let you have a page again?' As for the suggestion membership forms could be put in the club shop, they are there if you look.

A view far more understandable came from the 32 per cent who say we do not have a high enough profile on match days, a point of contact where coach bookings, joining up, paying subscriptions etc could be undertaken. The Hall is where most fans get closest to United and the committee recognises this. At this very

moment we are trying to get ourselves a little niche inside the ground where those very matters can be attended to. More controversial were thoughts that the AGM might be better held either before or after a game rather than on an evening midweek. But where before the game? And how many members (remember the AGM is members only) will be bothered post-match, especially following a few bevvies and a defeat? But it is an idea that has to be considered – and will be.

Around 25 per cent of people have a problem with filling in a form to join. Too much hassle etc, etc. So what do you do if you want to open a bank account, fancy a credit card, want a passport, any form of credit, are sent a tax return, a census form, blah, blah, blah? You sit down and fill it in. We have to have details of our members for all sorts of reasons and completing our form should take no one more than two minutes of anyone's precious time. YET, again this is definitely something that could be done far more conveniently at the ground on a match day, so we refer back to the clearly key point above concerning match-day profile.

Finally there are 8 per cent who simply do not want to join. Full stop. Some feel we are too close to the current owners, while others are still fighting old battles over travel. If you hold those viewpoints, fair enough. Each to their own. Yet I was interested – and depressed – to be told a few fans even think the Trust is 'elitist'. I have some good news for them, though. Elitism is now firmly IN. Charles Clarke, the new Education Secretary and a bit of an Old Labour class warrior of the past, said recently: "I would rather be elite than a second-rater. Elites are a fact of life." Hallelujah, brother. For if wanting to make the Trust as good as we can make it is being elitist, then I think we plead guilty. In the real world, the Trust is open house to absolutely anyone who wants to join, which is exactly how it should be. However, if anyone prefers massaging that chip on their shoulder, fine. A lot of us just think they are making a misguided mistake.

Mike, a fascinating piece of research – and one that the Trust cannot, and will not, ignore.

Messrs Smith, FitzGerald, Jeffreys and Scriven are also investigating putting together a Trust Yearbook in 50s/60s format. Something else to get us noticed, all being well.

There are even moves afoot for the Trust to begin trading as the Shrimpers Trust, whilst retaining the SUSCT tag for official purposes. But nothing will be done in that regard without a full consultation with the entire membership, so rest easy.

10-PIN BOWLING, 10-PIN BOWLING, 10-PIN BOWLING, 10-PIN BOWLING

On the committee's social front I must now move straight on without further ado to the Trust's next major event – or events as it now is. Alan Perry's 10-PIN BOWLING EXTRAVAGANZA on January 16 is SOLD OUT already. But don't despair, there is room for another 40 to take part on January 23. And here is what you get on both occasions:

THREE games of bowling for £10 per person (plus shoe hire) with prizes and 'fun' for all.
SCORE a strike when the Gold TenPin is randomly positioned as the HeadPin and a bottle of bubbly (remember Tesco's is now the best you can get) will be yours!!!
ADDITIONAL 'fun' bowling – backwards, on one leg, on your knees, up your (no, that can't be right) etc.
Winner receives a trophy.
VENUE: Broadway Superbowl, 258 Leigh Road, Leigh-on-Sea, 7.0pm for 7.30pm.
THERE is a licenced bar, plus available hot food and drinks.

To reserve your place, simply send £10 per person to Alan Perry at 109 Blenheim Chase, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. SS9 3BY, along with the names and addresses of all those wishing to take part. If you have any queries or require further info, ring 01702-476458 or e-mail alanperry4@hotmail.com Should be great nights, so strike while the going is good.

A further Quiz Night is also in the pipeline for the late February / early March period , as well as that anticipated Q & A some time next month.

Apologies if you have been trying to get Trust info from the websites recently. Richard Coxell's old one has frozen, while Dave Scriven's new Trust site has been hit by a hard disk problem (I know how he feels) that he is gradually rectifying. Keep trying it.

Great news. We have finally decided on our sponsored player. OK, not quite. Actually we will be sponsoring the kit of new physio John Stannard, chiefly because the Scriven 'Quid-A-Goal' proceeds are likely to go towards purchasing physio equipment that John needs for the United dressing-room. When it comes to a shirt for auction at the end of the campaign, though, we will looking for one with a little more kudos.

It will be interesting to see how many of the 3,000 flyers due to be distributed before the SUSCT-sponsored clash with Boston on December 14 are filled in and sent back. Paul Fitz's excellent missive, also in the programme, could surely have left no one in any doubt as to why the unattached should 'come on down'. Let's hope a few took the trouble to read it and do so. I was on duty at the steps leading up from the Fairfax Drive car park from about 2.10pm and am happy to say that the reception I got was more or less totally positive. Only a woman who said she was an Arsenal fan (?) did not fancy a form, while one bloke reckoned the Quid A Goal would bring in enough for a sticking plaster. That, of course, was before Leon got to work. Other committee men and members were strategically placed elsewhere and thanks, too, to Dean Allum for distributing the flyers from the programme hut in the main car park.

Boston should certainly have put us in the public eye somewhat and was a chance for us to let some of our members see what life is like on the other side of the tracks by enjoying a place in the executive box allocated to match sponsors plus a bit of corporate hospitality (hot and cold buffet, selecting the Man of the Match, getting autographs in the players' lounge etc). It sounded beautifully elitist to those of us left craving warmth in the East Greens. The important thing was just being able to give a random sample of the Trust loyalists who would never otherwise have the chance to enjoy such a day to do just that. Top of the guest list were our OAP stars Kitty Baxter and Phil Laflin, both mere striplings at 85. Kitty was accompanied by son Peter and Phil by wife Ada. Also present were Philip Camp and son Alex, Trevor Emery, Mark Howe, Derek Gibson, Jim Cornell, Ben Clarkson, Craig Childs, Brian Cotgrove, Brian Evans, Barry Smart, Brian Worth and Terry, Kathy, Kerry and Grace Jeffreys. Plus we were helping United, which is what we are about.

So what happened? Details now on Boston and all our other battles pre the distribution deadline, with musings from the moment.

BOURNEMOUTH (H, 23/11, L1-0): Anyone got little beads of sweat breaking out on their foreheads? A ludicrous-looking penalty awarded by a referee (P Armstrong) who seemed unhappy about making any decision unless he was at least 50 yards from the ball gave the surprisingly ordinary Cherries their one shot on target of the entire 90 minutes. But it was enough to send us crashing to another horrendous home defeat. Not that we created much more, apart from a Damon Searle blast beaten out near half-time, a Graeme Jones chance spurned after Steven Clark finally made it to the by-line and Mark Salter's header over that a Gary Moore or Bill Garner would have buried for breakfast. Our lack of goals, our inability to carve out anything like a worthwhile number of chances and the total isolation of our front two from any sort of meaningful midfield support is starting to send us into a league tailspin which looks less and less stoppable. Do I hear the sound of oil being applied to the inner workings of the alarm bells?

HARTLEPOOL (A, 26/11, FAC 1st rd replay, W2-1): Will it be the Cup that cheers or a drain on our 'promotion ambitions'? Would we have swapped this triumph on the Tees for three points? Only time will tell, though this was still a fine result timed to perfection with strikes from Tes and Leon Cort in the final two minutes. Pool's killjoy stewards must have feared the worst as our drums were confiscated prior to kick-off. Berry Enterprises ensured 110 people got up to Victoria Park and back on our two coaches – out of the 184 who attended in total – and victories like this make it all worthwhile. Best wishes to the group who missed the jaunt because of a car accident early in the morning and ended up either hurt in hospital or keeping those who were injured company.

DARLINGTON (A, 30/11, L2-1): All that way back up to the north east to see the Quakers get their oats thanks to another bout of United over-generosity. Leon gave away a penalty, whether right or wrong, which Darryl saved superbly. Then Tes blew a spot chance to equalise with a sorry effort more like a conversion. Is he being coached by Jonny Wilkinson? In between, Barry Conlon paid us back for all the taunts he received as the horror of the Hall back in 98-99 by lashing Darlo in front. They made it two late on and Tes's strike finished up as no more than a poor consolation. So another game drifts by from which we should have got something, but ended with nothing. And the play-off places recede just a little further into the distance, even taking into account an hour-long post-match inquest. Howard Wilkinson must have been impressed with Rob's angry reaction, as he copied it after Sunderland were trounced by Manchester City.

BOURNEMOUTH (H, 7/12, FA Cup 2nd rd, D1-1): All those crossed fingers failed to do the bizzo as, after hanging on for this draw, Alan Mullery pulled us out the third-round home plum of.....Crewe! And that's assuming we can pull off another stunning replay triumph (which we couldn't!). SJS brothers Aaron MacDonald (9) and Scott MacDonald (11) kicked off proceedings by handing over our Player of the Month trophy to Tony Scully. Mr G had suggested a bet and ventured our communal £4 on a 3-2 win with Steven Clark to score the first goal. Odds? A tasty 190-1. It should have been 1,900-1 as Clarkie was on the bench! Darryl kept us alive with a series of fine saves, though their goal was headed in from just four yards. Was that cross not Darryl's ball? Mark Rawle was clearly hyped up after his equaliser, living in hope it would gloss over his howler miss from a few minutes earlier as he blazed over from 12 yards with the Cherries' keeper spreadeagled on the ground. Oh dear, just the one at home – again!

BOSTON (H, 14/12, W4-2): Leon's brilliant headed first-ever United centre-back treble, our first hat-trick since Julian Hails at Leicester back on the 23rd September 1995, four at home for the first time since last Boxing Day against Rushden, more than one at the Hall for the first time since August 26 and three before half-time for the first time since October 1999. Yet, unhappily, the question has to be asked. Was anyone totally satisfied? The 43 minutes of the second half, before Leon completed his threesome, were possibly our direst yet this season, even worse than Shrewsbury. Rock-bottom Boston, certainly no great shakes, were storming through us and cutting back the deficit with worrying ease. Our one tactic seemed again to be the depressing 'hoof it forward and hope for the best'. Tony Scully's dazzling first-half run and shot clearly made no impact at all on what our approach should be. And Mark Rawle's clinical finish showed where he operates best – which is not down the left side of midfield to accommodate Graeme Jones. If Boston's finishing at times had not been on about a par with the effectiveness of great sport Terry's half-time effort to win the car, we could have been seriously embarrassed. Thanks to Mr Berry for my lift to the ground, necessitated by my car's blown water pump. I must pay him back some time with a venison burger or pheasant sandwich in the newly-opened Blue Boar. The Echo mentioned the plaque on the refurbished pub's Victoria Avenue wall – but, as usual, failed to state it was the Supporters Club that put it there!

BOURNEMOUTH (A, FA Cup 2nd rd replay, L3-2). Panic stations. Berry Travel is 30 minutes late at Hadleigh Church and a lonesome yours truly has had to go into the printer's adjacent to the pick-up point to change £1 so I can use the nearby call box and check I have not been left behind. There we go, 20p in the slot and.....****! There's the coach. The receiver is slammed down, the 20p disappears down the BT black hole and we're off. Shame the babe in the micro-skirt who arrived about the same time as me got on the No 1 to Rayleigh instead of taking in the delights of Dean Court. Five packed coaches assembled at Fleet Services - very impressive. On departure, those of us lucky to be on coach one were able to 'enjoy' the second half of the Boston battle again on video. Hardly fit for young children, that one. Time passed swiftly in conversation with Sue Channon, striking a blow for all our female members by leaving her other half and the children at home while she travels to back the Blues. This is clearly someone with her priorities absolutely right. Our horde is located in one of the new stands at the Cherries' revamped patch. Everyone's vocal chords get plenty of pre-action warming-up, though giving myself third-degree burns to the oesophagus after guzzling a white-hot steak and kidney pie slightly took the gloss off. The view was excellent until a squad of the Booze Brothers, who always attend such matches in inebriated force, lurched in five minutes after the action had started and decided to stand as there were not enough seats for them all to sit down. Yawn! Rob must have been delighted with the backing for the team. It was incessant first half, even after Leon lost that big bugger Steve Fletcher who headed into the top corner. But heads never dropped, we went up and at 'em and the Army was a tumult when Tes slid away our equaliser from a rebound off their sub keeper. The noise then

reached dangerous decibels levels when Mark Rawle nodded us in front on the stroke of half-time. 2-1 up, could we hold on? Was Dario Gradi contemplating suicide? Sadly, as it turned out, no on both counts. We couldn't pick up the pace as we were pegged back second half, Rob made one or two baffling substitutions and positional changes and home sub Derek Holmes silenced us with eight minutes left with almost his first touch of the encounter. Fears of the inevitable grew and were realised with a minute of normal time left as we cracked once more. Game over, hopes dashed, gloom descended. The lads were applauded off and they acknowledged how much their followers had got behind them. It was a subdued journey home. Oh well, it's back to the bread and butter – and now there are no distractions to deflect from our play-offs assault.....

Bournemouth was great. But the Hartlepool and Darlo jaunts merit a special tribute to all those involved in sorting out the Trust travel for a pair of 520-mile round trips in the space of five days and to all those Trust members – and the odd (very odd) non-Trust member – who made the effort to make one or even both those journeys. Notable, of course, was main man Mr Berry, who after a couple of recent substantial losses turned it all round on the Pool trip by producing a profit of.....£2.50! Chris and Paul Yeomanson took charge of the double-decker that day, with a big thank-you going to Matt Overall and Roy Keyes for ruling the roost on the other coach. And again, thanks to United for their subsidies, which kept the price down to an incredible fiver a head for our two Cup trips.

Chris also planned to go to Feethams. But because our coach was overbooked – 50 passengers, only 49 seats – he gave up his slot. So imagine his anger when he found that adult member SCOTT PETERS did not turn up because he had trouble rising from his pit. To quote Chris: “NO phone call, NO sorry, NO trip norf for me!!! I await his next booking with interest !!!” Unbelievable.

The Christmas and New Year period are probably the busiest and most tricky of the year for Chris. So help him out by getting your bookings in quick for Cambridge (Dec 26th, all-ticket), Carlisle (hurrah, Jan 4th unless the Cumbrians are still in the Cup) and Shrewsbury (Jan 11th). 01702-558978 or 07703-898698 as usual. Hope Torquay goes well, especially for those who stay for the post-clash Christmas Party / Quiz Night with the Seagulls fans.

The latest Liaison Committee meeting was held on November 20 attended by the usual suspects – Terry, Paul, and Dave from the Trust, Geoffrey King, Derek Wilshire and Chris Phillips from United. (There was also one scheduled for today, December 18, but I am afraid details of that must until NUMBER 44).

First issue resolved was that the 5 per cent in the club shop applies to Trust members ALL year round on presentation of proof of membership. So splash out on some trinkets.

Quid A Goal cash will be used to pay for the club's required physio equipment. United will purchase it, we will pay once the Quid A Goal comes to an end. It is still not too late to take part. You simply get in touch with Dave S on dave@shrimperzone.com and he will provide you with all the details. Basically, it is each time Blues score, you cough £1. Time to cough.

GK confirmed again that it is his wish that a Trust member should become a board member – though that will not happen until the club's future becomes somewhat clearer.

Do you use the Roots Hall Avenue gate? Found it shut on match day? It seems there is no reason for that and Dave Jobson will be consulted. That should see the issue resolved. Should.

GK felt that changes were needed to the Shrimpers Bar to pull in more customers and he will be looking at décor and other issues in the next few weeks. It hardly helps when several expensive pictures have apparently been half-inched of late. PF expressed the need for more seating areas, while DS suggested playing a video of the last away match on the big screen to pull in more customers. On recent form you might think this could drive customers away, but GK agreed to look at the novel Scriven plan.

GK advised the committee that the new SUFC official calendar for 2003 will be selling at £5.99 and includes something for everyone i.e. pictures containing a player, some Pulse Cheerleaders and a car. I hear a poll of

fans has shown the relative interest in the content is as follows: Players 0.05 per cent, cars 0.45 per cent, Pulse Cheerleaders 99.5 per cent. For a first effort, I would say it's OK. Trouble is, being sponsored by the local Chrysler dealer, it looks as if Blues have had to include one of their bods in a couple of photos and, to be honest, he hasn't quite got the 'charisma' most buyers are seeking.

Now to make myself even more popular. Are you sending in those Christmas Draw tickets, as time is almost up. Remember the big day is Sunday December 29 v Scunthorpe. So Terry Jeffreys (32 Herondale, Basildon, Essex. SS14 1RR) and Richard Coxell (20 Redcliff Drive, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. SS9 1AY) need your stubs and cash back by Saturday the 28th AT THE LATEST. The good news is we have already taken enough to cover all the prize money, so that £1,000 could be yours.

Great credit to Peter Borland, who sent us a cheque for £15 and also returned his tickets because he won last year. Not that it was one of the big prizes, simply a £20 voucher. A very generous gesture, Peter. Also much gratitude to Steve Wilson, who bought all his tickets and then sent an additional £12 donation in gratitude at somehow managing to get a free ticket into Bristol Rovers. These are just the sort of people I enjoy publicising. Anyone in the opposite camp? I couldn't give a damn.

Not a lot of that new blood Rob wanted has materialised, but we have at least landed Jay Smith for 18 months and that is no bad thing judging by the majority of his performances since he arrived here on loan from Aston Villa. If he can just add a touch of extra beef and pace to his skill, he will be a more than useful midfield asset. We missed him for 85 minutes at Bournemouth, that's for sure.

York appear to be in the mire again, with chairman John Bachelor keen to put the club's ownership in the hands of their supporters' trust and the players finding their bank accounts have recently been devoid of wages. Strange then that Bachelor should be on the radio recently singing the praises of a new range of York City lingerie that was coming on to the market. Just right, I suppose, if you are going 'bust' or are short of a few knicker. If Blues thongs ever go on sale in the club shop, we can genuinely start to panic.

But while times are tough, we should remember what they were like back in the mid-80s when Anton Johnson was using SUFC like his own personal cash and carry. We had a bit of cash and he wanted to carry it off. Those were the days when poor old Bobby Moore was in charge and blessed with a squad just slightly lacking on the quality front.

In the biography of Moore written by Jeff 'Venables for England' Powell, a monster seven paragraphs out of 268 hardback pages are devoted to the defensive legend's time in charge at Roots Hall. But in one of those seven, Moore reveals: "I've got a centre-half who must be scared stiff of heights because he won't go up to head the ball. And we've got so many bailiffs knocking at the door that every night I go round collecting all the televisions, lock them in my office and keep the keys in my pocket."

Ahhhh, happy days. Just a shame he could not have got the fruit machines and the Christmas Club money nailed down as well. And as for the centre-half, select from Warren May, Steve Hatter, Tony Hadley and Shane Westley. I know who my money is on. I especially remember one memorable encounter this 'star' had with a fellow supporter in the old north paddock at half-time during one particularly horrendous personal nightmare among those darkest hours of '85. After an especially pointed berating as he left the pitch, the player in question turned round and suggested the fan should take his place if he thought he could do better. To be honest, I was surprised the bloke did not ask for some kit there and then.

Hands up if you hate Christmas shopping. Yes, I know, but it has to be done. I was in Lakeside on November 21, when I came out of one emporium and walked straight through the middle of a crocodile of shuffling people. Following the crocodile to its head, I was dismayed to see it arrived at the W*** H** shop. Outside were three figures sat at a table. One was immediately recognisable as Michael Carrick (gasp). To the right was keeper Raimond van der Gouw. But, initially, I had a job recognising what I at first thought was a tramp sat in the middle. Unshaven, he had one of those soppy tea cosy things pulled down over his head as if he was trying to disguise himself. I moved a little closer, though, and finally saw that it was.....Joe Cole. Joe had missed out on Sven's call-up for a few days of pampering at Champneys and presumably

wanted to show how he would have benefited from a couple of mud packs and a wax bath, with, presumably, the option of a male 'Brazilian' if you asked nicely. Anyway, all three were squiggling on books and pictures being thrust in front of them. You could certainly not say they were signing autographs, which involves joined up writing. By then I had seen more than enough and left the sorry mob of saddos to fawn in peace.

You could hardly say our Blues heroes get the celebrity treatment. I see Rob Newman was only asked to turn on the Christmas lights in Southchurch Road. When it came to the Christmas lights in Southend town centre, it was decided we needed a proven winner, a sporting titan, a man who put the Great into Britain. Yes, stand up.....Frank Bruno. The fastest Frank's right arm ever worked was when he was crossing himself before going into the ring prior to his battering in Vegas by Mike Tyson. I understand The Pope rang him afterwards for some tips. The former Mrs B also allegedly had to do a bit of 'ducking and diving' as well in her time. Know what ah mean, 'Arry? What a joke.

Excellent news to hear that 'Alf' is alive and well and still a big Blues fan. Alison Moyet used to be a regular visitor to the Hall and was always giving United little mentions when interviewed in the music press and the like. Then she just seemed to slip out of view until landing a part in the West End musical Chicago. Now, with a first new CD release on the market in eight years, it's publicity time – hence a few radio interviews etc where she has revealed her love of SUFC is as strong as ever. Talking to Danny Baker on Radio London – thanks for the wake-up call Mr I – she revealed she does not attend as many matches as she once did chiefly because of having three children to look after. The round trip from her Hertfordshire home with them in tow is a bit too much. She lets her husband attend and report back. But her Blues shirt was worn with pride at the World Cup, despite abuse from some Brum scum. Good girl. Alf is now appearing at the Old Vic for anyone who fancies cocking an ear to her latest fine warblings.

And that is that for 2002. NUMBER 44 should be out earlyish in the new year – shorter I hope. Any comments, hostile or friendly, info, snippets etc, send them, as usual, to: nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk

NR (18/12)

PS 1. Former committee man and Mr Microphone Jeff Allen may not always have seen eye to eye with his Trust colleagues. But it would seem a little churlish not to wish him and Sarah-Jane all the best for the future following their recent nuptials. Was Terry Alderton best man?

2. Thanks to Terry J for his fantastic newsletter distribution in recent months. But as he gets deeper into his secretarial duties, he has passed the baton back to a new team of me, Richard, Jon-Paul FitzGerald and Joe Elliott. We'll be doing our best. But if you have a newsletter receipt problem or want it by e-mail in future, contact new membership secretary Paul Yeomanson on p.yeomanson@blueyonder.co.uk

3. Have yourself a merry little Christmas etc, etc and a Happy New Year to all SUSCT newsletter readers around the world.