

SUSCT NEWSLETTER

45

THAT was some strike from Damon Searle against Rushden & Diamonds, wasn't it? I cannot remember a better volley from a Blues player in all my moons of watching United. It was the perfect goal to win any game, with our tally of 13 points taken at home out of the last 15 showing just how disastrous our early form at the Hall has been for our chances of promotion this season.

The recent upturn has certainly been good news for a certain Third Division manager – and my understanding is he might just have needed it.

At the United AGM on January 30, praise gushed forth almost unanimously for the boss. There was clear relief at the ending of the nightmare run that produced a dire two wins, a draw and nine defeats in the league between October 19 and January 4 and the start of a crucial little spell of victories which now seems to have guaranteed our reappearance in at least the Third Division in 2003-04. Ron declared: “Rob has my full support. His contract is up at the end of the season, but I can't see any reason why I should want to change things.”

Now that may well be true. Even more so at this particular moment in time, when we find ourselves still clinging to the coat-tails of the play-off race rather than in a dog-eat-dog, trapdoor tussle with Exeter and Bristol Rovers. It is just that some intriguing recent info, which has come my way from depths even murkier than those inhabited by Deep Throat, makes me wonder if it might always have been the case in the darkest days of late. And you might wonder, too. For my siren claims that the turnaround could not have been better timed. Without it, Rob could by now already have joined the massed ranks of the managerial unemployed. So serious was the situation regarded at one time that the story is a senior board member reportedly held covert talks with someone else about a possible hot-seat takeover – that someone being a manager with previous experience since the mid-90s, and varying degrees of success, at more than one current Third Division club. The rumour certainly reached the players. One was heard to pipe up: “We can't believe what we are hearing.”

Well you wouldn't, would you? There is always tittle-tattle surrounding every outfit in the league. It is part of the lifeblood of the game. And it is always tempting just to write it off and say: That can't be true. But then look how Stewart Robson suddenly arrived on the scene – thank you C** U for somehow not making him your new chief – and next ask yourself if this extra little titbit is more than just a coincidence.

A week after the above details came my way – and I was quite prepared to discount them – I took my usual seat in the East Greens prior to the whipping inflicted on hapless Hull. Mr I sat in the row directly in front of me and quickly fell into conversation with a gentleman seated on his right. At half-time, the man turned towards me and, gor blimey guv, I recognised that it was none other than.....our mystery manager! Now had he suddenly become a Blues fan? Was he doing a bit of spying or scouting? Or was there perhaps another reason for his trip to the Hall to cast his eye over the lads? One thing is for sure. He told Mr I he was rather impressed by what he had seen – along with imparting his philosophy on football and just how he likes his team to play.

AS for the identity of our boss (who is / was/ might be/ might have been) in waiting, it's.....no, I am sure you will have much more fun trying to work it out. Send me your guesses to the usual e-mail address I give at the end of the newsletter. I shall be most interested to see who you put in the frame. First prize is recognition in Number 46. In the light of five wins and a draw in our last eight games, his chance – if it ever existed, of course – may have gone. We'll just have to wait and see. Because it's a funny old game.....

Anyway, before we move on to distinctly Trust matters, for those members unable to attend the AGM what else happened at the first I have had the pleasure of being part of? And, before I forget, well done again to Ron and the board for even having one. We got so used to Vic always seeming to contract serious amnesia when annual meetings and laying out the club accounts came due.

About 70 shareholders and proxies were present on a bitter night. We arrived to chilled bones and left to three inches of snow. Once through a check-in desk as rigorous as anything I have seen since visiting Berlin during the heady late 60s days of the Cold War, I enjoyed trying to put names to the faces of the directors. Because if Michael Markscheffel, Ray Osborne, Paul Robinson, Frank Van Wezel, Anita Vine or Derek Wilshire have ever passed me at the Hall at any time in the last few decades, I have not been aware of it.

Once we kicked off, the first move saw the directors' report and accounts come up for consideration and adoption. The SUFC Ltd chairman's statement had Geoffrey King's name at its foot. He revealed a loss for 2001-02 of £707,665, down from £782,111 the previous year. The loss of ITV Digital cash has been a major blow, but big savings have been made – especially on the wages front. Ticket sales were down, but season ticket sales showed a 43% increase in cash taken. So I can feel I have been doing my bit! The commercial side of United is clearly being run more professionally than ever before and, while I think of it, United also deserve great credit for the work they have been putting in in the community. Biggest directorial shareholder is Mark Markscheffel with 43,997. With his background in cycles, he at least appears to have a head start should the order ever be issued: On yer bike, mate! Ray Osborne has 1,314 and the rest precious few. Perhaps the fact there is no hope of any dividends persists in keeping them out of the market.

Also, in case you needed reminding in relation to SUFC Ltd: “The ultimate controlling party is Mr R Martin, chairman of the Direct Controlling Undertaking, South Eastern Leisure plc (SEL) and majority shareholder of Martin Dawn plc, which has a 50% shareholding in SEL. SEL has a 76.3% shareholding in the company.”

The accounts were passed and then it was on to re-election of the three directors whose names were in the frame for the current year – messrs Robinson, Van Wezel and Wilshire. Geoffrey King invited all three to address the assembled throng, which they gamely agreed to do.

Legal eagle Paul Robinson spoke of his experience and the contacts he could attract to the club and declared his wish to “bring the success which I believe we are poised to achieve.” Sounded good and in for another stint, despite two votes against. Hi-Tec chairman Frank Van Wezel could offer his “sound advice” from the sports trade. He stressed running United was “a business like a sports business.” His evangelical rallying cry was: “The goal is promotion, trying to get back to the glory years in the First Division – and I will work towards that goal.” You felt tears welling and he had made a good start with me anyway because my brother always said he was a good bloke when they used to play doubles down at Thorpe Bay Tennis Club. Returned unanimously. Derek Wilshire was easily the most nervous of the three – maybe he had heard he is supposed to be an Arsenal season ticket holder. Rambled on about his past in banking and working with Luton, among others. Not exactly an inspiration, but given a fresh mandate. At least three against, though.

GK then introduced the fragrant Anita. He revealed she joined the club 18 months ago as a financial controller, was very good at her job, very accurate and produced timely information. Anita herself then imparted, almost inaudibly, she was a qualified accountant, had worked and lived locally and was looking to improve United's accounting operation. No mention that she might be a Blues fanatic and remembered going barmy on the terrace at Gigg Lane back in '91. But you can't have everything. Officially appointed to the board.

No one opposed the re-appointment of Deloitte and Touche as auditors, so now Ron took centre stage for his overview on how United stands.

He rated 2001-02 “a reasonable year”, put our underlying loss at £318,000 and believed that could be reduced to £200,000. But “exposed revenue streams” (?) at Roots Hall made it important we move. Contracts on Fossetts Farm were exchanged back in August and Ron expected the Secretary of State for the Environment ie Two Jags to allow Southend Council to make the final decision on its progress. If the go-ahead is given the cash for Fossetts can be raised, with much of that stemming from the planned redevelopment of Roots. There would be

4-6 months of construction build-up, with building of the new stadium taking around 16 months. We would hope to be in Fossetts by 2005. The regeneration and employment aspects mean Ron remains optimistic about the council's OK. As for Karers, he rates their opposition to any development on Fossetts Farm as unsustainable. "We think we can counter their arguments." The main difference between the stadium as planned previously and that planned now is that leisure facilities such as the multiplex cinema will be absent. "The market for that has collapsed and the leisure element has now been greatly reduced." However, apart from football, there will be income-generating activities along retail, leisure and industrial lines.

Trust vice-chairman Paul FitzGerald raised the fact that by 2005 United's accumulated debt could stand at around the £9million mark. Small beer if you are Chelsea, but just a tad worrying in our position. Ron talked of debt rescheduling, then uttered the immortal words: "I imagine the debt will be written off by South Eastern Leisure." Remember that. South Eastern Leisure will own the new stadium, which will cost about £10m to construct but be worth about £2m. The value will come from the income that can be derived from it. Ron also expressed a desire to have 4,000 rather than 400 shareholders, though that particular 'dream' is for the future – as it then took 20 tedious minutes to explain to one of those present. But the bottom line is that Roots Hall is simply not viable for what the club wants to do in years to come.

Paul also received a few deserved words of praise. Ron revealed how Paul makes contact with him, GK and Colin Wagman to raise stadium matters and is also a 'good conduit' for some of the other issues at hand. So you can see we are trying to put our oar in. Ron then splashed out to buy all and sundry a half-time lubrication before someone demanded we have a minute's silence for the late Arthur Rowley. Once that was out of the way, Rob Newman, bathing in the warm glow of Ron's 'full support', was given his air time.

He promptly revealed 80 per cent of the squad could go if we are promoted, he reckons the squad is motivated – contrary to a number of doubters in the audience – he rates Mark Rawle more likely to score goals than Barrington Belgrave and labelled Tes "brilliant but frustrating." He will also continue to play whatever formation he feels will be successful on the day, but will be trying not to "put square pegs in round holes." No more Steven Clark at centre-forward then.

Rob and two other members of the squad were drug tested about 10 weeks ago and found to be negative. So the Third Division player discovered with nandrolone swilling around his blood stream did not come from the Hall and our recent home lift is built on adrenaline only.

He was fingered for his apparent antagonism towards Clarkie. But Rob declared: "I have no problem with Steven Clark and he has no problem with me telling him things from the touchline. The players know what I am like and they never take it personally. I believe in my players and I respect them and I hope they feel the same about me." A no-nonsense captain is another requirement. Kevin Maher may be a nice bloke, but we all know it takes more than that. Rob admitted: "I want someone in my team who is a leader, who talks a lot. But when I speak to other managers they all say the same. 'Don't we all!'"

Ron chose this moment to chip in with a few words on the players' salaries, revealing: "We pay generally below average, but the bonus incentive is far greater probably than at any other club in the division." Which begs the question: If it is that good, why do the players not always look as if they are giving their all EVERY week to bolster their bank balances? As for Stewart Robson, Rob insisted: "I believe he will be a major asset and he is our first-team coach." On whether the appointment has his wholehearted approval, you must make up your own mind. Steve Tilson retains his 'youth' orientation, with David Crown now more a 'scouting' master.

When someone pointed out our shocking disciplinary record, Rob replied rather off-handedly: "Players are fined, but if they feel they have money to lose that's up to them. There is no reason to get booked for dissent. Referees do not change their minds." It all instilled sufficient confidence for one attending shareholder to announce that he felt Rob was 'seriously lacking' as a manager. And on that upbeat note, the evening was just about over for another 12 months.

A 'muchos gracias' here – to Steve Dunn-Lowes, Peter Mason, Simon Doole, Matthew Eva and Hugh Cumberland for allowing the Trust to use their proxy votes.

Before we move on to Trust committee business, a couple of points. Firstly, can anyone knock up an egg on toast? Boots and Laces has been looking for a cook. Secondly, further to my love affair with 'Culture' Secretary Tessa Jowell, I see her other half is under investigation by Italian magistrates inquiring into allegations of fraud and money-laundering by companies owned by Italian premier and AC Milan moneybags Silvio Berlusconi. So she really is the perfect figurehead to safeguard the future of English football.

The last Trust committee meetings were held on February 3 and 24 at the hugely hospitable Blue Boar, so here is a melange of the main points from the two gatherings. In brief we are continuing to push for a Trust Q & A with the lords of the board – plus Rob – asap and possible dates are now being considered by the relevant parties. One may have been chosen by the time you read this. Work on the planned Trust yearbook, similar to that brought out by both fans and the club in the past, is ongoing. The relaunch of the website is getting closer – and I promise to get the new committee penpix updated as soon as possible. Dave Scriven has taken some nice snaps to go with them. The trading name of Shrimpers Trust was agreed, there having been no member opposition to that. In relation to the Trust's charity links, we aim to make a donation to the Elizabeth Venture Play Scheme and will be looking at how we might also assist United's Football in the Community programme.

At the first of the meetings, Paul Yeomanson provided the plans for the new SUSCT display stand to be sited in the Shrimpers Club. These were welcomed enthusiastically, given the OK and the stand was up in all its glory in time for the Bristol Rovers game five days later. It looked first-rate, was a tribute to Paul himself and all committee members will be doing a stint on duty there before the end of the season. So if at any home game you want travel info, membership info, to join up, have a query on the Trust etc you now know where to go. While it has so far been in the Shrimpers' 'back room', we hope to be able to relocate it shortly to a slightly more visible spot just inside the entrance. The membership has requested it, the committee has provided it, so please make use of it.

Kevin Feasey, so low-profile of late that many of us have almost forgotten what he looks like, will be emerging back into the limelight to play a major part again in the Trust's Player of the Year night set for May 7. That is great news, remembering the success that Kevin's input made of last year's gathering.

Terry Jeffreys' secretarial matters were as varied as ever. First issue concerned the Trust board member. In the light of the divine Miss Vine's arrival, it was felt it was time to press our belief that this should mean renewed consideration of a Trust member joining the elite. Supporters Direct feel we have a case, but United still feel the financial position of the club is not yet up to it. Hopefully we will eventually have more success than the Exeter City Trust. They thought they were about to be offered a seat of power, then fell out with the City chairman after he accused them of having an 'infestation' within the membership. Charming.

We were unable to get anyone along to the Football Supporters' Federation Southern Division meeting at Reading, but Terry put in an appearance at a Football in the Community seminar organised by Supporters Direct on February 11. The FSF is also organising a lobby of MPs on April 1 (April Fools Day – perfect) to try to keep fans' concerns on the future of the game in the public eye. If you want to go as a Southend representative for the Trust, contact Terry on 01268-523974 or on terry.jeffreys@btinternet.com

Terry has recently been poring through another best-seller – Lotteries and The Law. The good news is our Christmas Draw was, and forthcoming end-of-season draw is, operated legally.

On the Trust's money front it was agreed that treasurer Craig Fillary should switch some of our cash in hand to accounts paying better interest. Though these days it just about adds up to buttons whatever account your money is in. Thank heaven it has not all been in equities over the last three years. Perhaps we should simply stick the lot on Templegate's nap! Paul FitzGerald has also inquired whether the club would sell members some more shares, but at preferential rates. Sadly, they say the cost must remain at £7 each, with a minimum purchase of 10. Definitely an investment for the long-term future.

Membership secretary Paul Yeomanson reported 731 adult members and 111 SJS – a total of 842. Remember if you know anyone who wants to join – and someone from the Caribbean paradise of Grenada has very wisely

just done so – contact Paul on p.yeomanson@bluevonder.co.uk Otherwise answer your renewal request as it arrives. Simply not having to bother about reminders saves Paul a hell of a lot of time.

On the fund-raising front, Ron has coughed £2.50 for Quid A Goal – that's per goal – and we have all but covered the cost of the physio equipment being purchased for John Stannard's use at the club. He thanked us in both the programme and on the United website, so we clearly have an SUFC representative here who has proved well worthy of our 2002-03 Trust sponsorship. Any extra cash raised will go to Trust funds.

Alan Perry's last 10-pin bowling night made us £270. Hopefully the next one on April 3 will do even better. Alan is constantly coming up with fund-raising ideas and deserves great credit for his enthusiastic input. Right now he would be especially interested to hear from anyone – male or female! – who fancies being part of a sponsored leg wax. Mr G? Alan's details are in the 'SUSCT Social Services' panel below. He has also written to 20 major firms with local representation to see if they would be willing to donate prizes for events the Trust stages. Only four replied – and only two coughed up! That was Hi-Tec, who gave us two superb items of sports equipment, and, you guessed it, McDonald's, who never miss an opportunity. Their offering? A buckshee Happy Meal!

SUSCT SOCIAL SERVICES

MARCH 8 – Boots and Laces Quiz night with the grand master of bafflers Guy Rickard. Chance to win a large bottle of whisky, too. Raffle plus food. SOLD OUT!

APRIL 3 – 10-pin bowling at the Broadway Superbowl, Leigh –on-Sea. Your balls may hang heavy, but Alan Perry puts his all into making it an enjoyable evening with sparkling prizes aplenty. £10 per person (payable in advance) plus shoe hire. Liquid refreshment and fodder available. To enter send your cheque, payable to SUSCT, to Alan at: 109 Blenheim Chase, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. SS9 3BY Inquiries to our organiser at alanperry4@hotmail.com or 01702-476458. May be sold out, so e-mail or ring first.

MAY 7 – SUSCT Player of the Year evening at the Shrimpers Club. Will Leon retain his trophy or has another player caught your eye? Blue movies provided by Kevin Feasey. Not to be missed by the discerning aficionado. Players present who can be fawned over at leisure. Get the date in your diary.

MAY 10 – Rickard Jnr, most famous for his Melody Maker-style review of the Yes tribute band on the Club Riga website, is back with a Music Quiz night. Will cover the whole gamut of sound from the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s and 00s, but Porcupine Tree fans could be at an advantage. Tables already selling so make sure you don't miss out by getting on down and contacting Alan Perry as above or Dave Scriven on dave@shrimperzone.com

The end-of-season draw details have been fixed. There will be 5,000 tickets only distributed at £1 each, with prizes of £500, £200 and the top 10 album chart CDs (donated by Steve Dunn-Lowes). So when your tickets start arriving please get them sold and back to Terry at 32 Herondale, Basildon, Essex. SS14 1RR just as you did before. Many thanks. The draw should be made at our last home game v Bury on April 26. Mention here, too of a very kind £50 donation to the Trust from Christmas £1,000 winner James Welham. Top ticket vendors this time will receive £100 (Alan has already promised it to the Trust!), £50 and £25.

While Chris Berry flogs himself mercilessly to ensure that our members get to every away game, Terry has made in-depth inquiries to see if there would be any worth in the Trust arranging some cut-price train travel for those who want it. Frankly, the value is not there, any package would only start from London and our coaches remain a far better economic bet unless you a) must have alcohol to ease your journey b) fancy dusting off your anorak for a spot of train-spotting.

Richard Coxell is still moving ahead with plans for the refurbishment of the grave of Oliver Trigg, with United generously agreeing to pay a third of the cost.

We would like to hear from anyone with any film or video of Blues in action down the years so we can investigate possibly putting some sort of production together. Two games from the 1993-94 season were already earmarked for a video special, but first we have to ensure no copyright laws are being infringed.

Anyone still hunting SUSCT badges should contact Terry, who still has a supply. A new one for the Shrimpers Trust is currently on the drawing board. Terry has also advertised our wares in the Association of Football Badge Collectors newsletter and has already elicited 20 inquiries, including one from the depths of the Czech Republic. The further the SUFC / SUSCT name can be spread, the better.

Chris Berry's travel schedule for the next month or so encompasses Hartlepool on March 15 and York (assuming they are still in business) on March 29. So if you want to get on board just ring the usual numbers – 01702-558978 or 07703-898698 (calls only). The Macclesfield trip was boosted by United again helping us to peg prices to a mere fiver. Their occasional subsidies are a big help and only add to a greater feelgood factor concerning the football club's present attitude to its supporters. I can confirm, following a recent visit, that the Berry household is a hive of Trust activity, with Chris involved in a dazzling balancing act between sorting out the Trust travel, keeping a grip on the Junior Shrimpers and trying to answer his constantly ringing phone. And that is before he starts worrying about sending Rosemary out to feed the guinea pigs. The array of drinking mugs from every club visited is very impressive, as are the pictures on the hall wall of numerous flag-waving champions from the Berry family's other passion – stock car racing. I had to admit I was totally flummoxed when Chris asked me if I knew the connection between the array of smiling faces, all snapped by Mr B. I hazarded the guess: "All won world titles?" Not quite. Chris replied: "No, all but two of them are dead!" It seems accidents, illness, acts of God etc had claimed almost the lot of them. But they can rest happy that they will forever live on at the Hadleigh shrine.

You simply cannot have too many meetings and the Liaison Committee (Paul FitzGerald, Dave Scriven, Terry Jeffreys, Chris Phillips, Geoffrey King and Derek Wilshire) got together on January 15 and February 19.

The Q & A position and Trust display stand for the Shrimpers being OK'd you know about. Paul queried why SUSCT donations to the football club were not acknowledged at the United AGM. GK branded this an 'oversight' and agreed it would be put right – at next year's AGM!

There has been deep and meaningful discussion on SUSCT Involvement in the Shrimpers Bar. GK has offered to turn the Shrimpers Bar into the SUSCT Shrimpers Bar. SUFC would run the show, but all else would be the Trust's responsibility and we could change things within reason. This is regarded by the Trust committee as an excellent idea, but much water will pass under the bridge before we are pulling our first pint. The bottom line is both we and the club would want to increase the takings and better the ambience and how that can be done requires detailed examination.

We would want real ale and a trial supply will be available in the Shrimpers and Far Post bar before the end of the season. GK plans the availability of hot food and drinks, reorganised seating and tables plus the redecoration of the toilet facilities. Our preferred option is to make the SUSCT Shrimpers 'members only', with Trust members getting in free. Non-members would face a nominal temporary membership fee. It would be nice to welcome in away fans and GK will look at a licence alteration to make this possible for those clubs who allow us to use their facilities. We appreciate that visiting supporters will have to be monitored e.g. in relation to those clubs with a recognised nutter tendency. Décor could be improved with our Hall of Fame material and extra SUFC memorabilia suitably displayed (and secured!) We would also require publicity in the programme in addition to doing our own advertising via newsletters and the internet. Discussions to continue.

Dave Scriven raised the point of continuing catering problems and United's catering overlord Gordon Harrold tried to explain his difficulties. The first point he made was that the outlets would be greatly helped if not all fans turned up at the peak times for service – pre-kick-off and right on half-time. That strain brings inevitable slowness of service. He has tried to purchase an external facility for food provision, but the cost has proved prohibitive. All staff come from the local catering college, have food handling certificates and are all familiar with the correct service procedures. But the key point that required answering was.....why no more bacon rolls? I am afraid it seems bacon costs rocketed post-foot and mouth and there have also been storage problems.

But the club are NOT trying to wriggle off the hook on any issue and want your feedback on the catering good and bad at the Hall. You can contact geoffrey.king@southendunited.co.uk and he will endeavour to ensure any matter you raise on the food front gets a response. You cannot say fairer than that.

On the issue of the Family Bonanza Day and those 'star' attractions who never quite made it, GK stressed that while some performers were mentioned in connection with the event none of them was confirmed.

Now on to Blues' recent performances. Here is what the lads have had to offer in the past few fixtures. Comments, as usual, are made immediately following the action.

SCUNTHORPE (A, 25/1, L4-1): All good things come to an end, but with Blues it is sadly all too often sooner rather than later. Three successive wins and high hopes of another were cut off at the knees by one deflected strike and three defensive blunders – one of which allowed Martin Carruthers to add to his ever-increasing tally against us. Jay Smith made it 1-1 with a sharp drive from the edge of the box, but that was about the sum total of positives. The Scunny report for the NoW stated: "The second half saw a resurgent Southend dominate the game and how they failed to draw level remains a mystery." Sadly, I have been unable to find a single Blues fan who was present to back up that view. Rob reckoned we could have shipped seven or eight – and that was rated the more realistic analysis. He declared: "It's a hard place to come to." So?

HULL (H, 1/2, W3-0): Spud has clearly worked his magic on Humberside. We have played some duffers this season, but the Tigers surely set a new standard for tameness. The first 15 minutes were pretty much all-square, though once Jay Smith rifled home a right-footer from 25 yards Blues were the only team in it. Mark Rawle and Jay's penalty looked to be setting us up for a rigging-rattling second half in front of the South Bank, only for Tes to be suckered into a daft retaliation and end up with a red card from sub ref Peter Kirkup. Tes is a key cog in the side, especially now we have hit some home form at last, and let's hope Rob will let him know his daft three-game ban is the last thing we needed. No blame attached to Kirkup, or for lame Andy Penn, who turned out one of the best officials we have had this season. The Hull squad cost a total of £1,090,000, with three players 'worth' £530,000 replaced at half-time by three who cost sweet nothing. Our 16 for the match weighed in at a princely £97,000. On this show, I would have to suggest we are getting the better value. Maher, Smith and Clark were outstanding in midfield, while Leon Cort and debut-making Stephen Kelly had the Hull front-men in their pocket. Danny Webb did what he always did best – commit a daft foul and look totally innocuous. Pity his talent does not match his mouth size – he might be average. On this form it is infuriating our seven home defeats to date will probably end up costing us what should have been a cast-iron play-off spot. Nice to see the lads on at half-time from my old school, West Leigh, for progressing in some national tournament or other. Great stuff, though our famous 2-1 victory over the then borough's best, Prince Avenue, at Fairways back in the 1963-64 season must surely still take precedence. Only sour note – apart from Clarkie not netting the first goal at 20-1 – was finding a true Blue who always comes to home games by bike being told he could not leave it on the other side of the railing going down towards the Shrimpers because 'it is contrary to health and safety regulations'. Now if the steps down to the Shrimpers were ever likely to be the scene of an Ibrox-style disaster I could understand the ruling. But what do you think? Another victory for a veteran United jobsworth. At least I am informed he wasn't wearing his Madonna mic on this occasion.

BRISTOL ROVERS (H, 8/2, D2-2): A bit of success and the fair-weather fans start to return. One recently spotted sunning his sorry self in Spain, rather than zipping up his anorak in the East Stand, slipped back to view what should have been another home win in the bag. First half we were excellent again against a Rovers side that looked a lot better than Conference fodder – and certainly better than Hull. But chances went to waste and Jay's penalty was a shocker – five spot misses in total out of the last six is a nonsense – before BB put us in front. Second half, though, was as if someone had flicked our 'off' switch. For 25 minutes we were back to our dire square one as they struck twice and we simply seemed incapable of responding. Kevin Maher, whose first-half show was as good from a midfielder as I have seen at the Hall, then levelled from the edge of the box as he at last escaped his markers and we might have pinched the win. But it was not to be and two more points disappeared down the plughole. SJS member Liam Harris, 12, did a smashing job of presenting the January Player of the Month award to Steven Clark.

WREXHAM (A, 15/2, L3-0): The Racecourse Ground has never been a particularly happy hunting ground for Blues. And when we perform as it seems we did, that is unlikely to change. First we couldn't win at home and were succeeding away. Now the opposite appears true. Our inconsistency is remarkably consistent. Jay Smith may have been injured while their second goal was in the process of being scored, but that had zero effect on the final outcome. Possibly the final nail in our play-off coffin. It's play-for-your-pride time, lads. And your contracts! Any player who finds they are not 'up' for certain games may have a career in the Third Division – but, hopefully, no longer at the Hall. One reported scandal - £9.50 for kids to get in.

RUSHDEN & DIAMONDS (H, 22/2, W2-1): Family Bonanza Day, with anyone expecting to see Liberty X brandishing their Brit Award sadly disappointed. No Girls Aloud as stand-ins either. Or Cheeky Girls – though that had to be a blessing. I'd rather have had Buster Bloodvessel back! Instead the feature act was 'boy band' Heat, Basildon's finest and a combo who just a year ago would apparently do local school gigs for..... £300! I would suggest a name change to Tepid. Ahhh! Takes me back to when Sweet headlined at the Westcliff High School Disco back in '71. The show's front man, Essex FM DJ Martin Day, clearly learned all he knows from Alan Partridge. It is fatal at a football match to admit you know nothing about football. And if he really had always wanted to be carried off on a stretcher, there were a few people around me gagging for the opportunity to oblige him. At least there was Tina Cousins. The Southend girl looked great and 'performed' two fine-sounding songs. Oh, and Terry Alderton's Southend anthem seemed to go down well, too. A huge improvement on most material of that ilk. Pity it was called 'The Seaside'. That's Blackpool, mate, not Southend. Overall, though, everyone seemed to have a good time, we attracted 2,500 people who would probably otherwise not have been present and, who knows, a few might even come back. We hope so. An additional 'Well done' to United's commercial department for their sterling work in getting the show on the road. And also to Trust member John Wharton for winning the four bikes at half-time. But what of the action? We really needed to make amends for our Essex Senior Cup exit and could not have made a better start. Mark Rawle threaded the fourth-minute opener through Elvis Presley wannabe Billy Turley's legs and, as I have said, Damon's 35-yard volley two minutes later was magnificent. Rushden never folded, went on to boss the majority of the game and were a physically stronger line-up. But we somehow held on and could have extended our lead had Dominic Foley and Mark Rawle been able to do better in one-on-ones late in the second half. Foley deserved a goal on his home debut for his hard work. Certainly a good enough performance to avoid any flying boots and cut eyebrows.

Remember a few months back, under Dave Webb I think, that we were desperately trying to sign an Adrian Coote from Norwich for around £50,000. The deal for the lanky striker fell through, but for once may have worked in our favour. He is currently at C** U, where their lone fan informs me Coote is "c**p!"

Interesting to see that United plan closer links with the Southend Ladies team. Rob is playing down rumours that one or two of his squad might fit in better with the fairer sex – and that one or two of the ladies are better than what he currently has on offer.

Emma Topsfield. What a doll. She was the Soccer AM soccerette on February 1. Aged 26, some sort of secretary at an insurance firm I think, single, from Shoeburyness and definitely a damsel with whom you could go over the top in the penalty area. Or so I thought until she waltzed through the plastic window – wearing a bloody H*****s shirt. Deport her back to Cockney land. Emma, Shoebury = SUFC only!

Finally, a big 'merci beaucoup' to Robin Michel, who has provided me with all the info I needed on George Duck – he of the same squad as the legendary Billy Best, Bill Garner, Joe Jacques etc back in 1971-72, when George played three games for us. Mr Duck later moved on to non-league Wealdstone, where he too became a bit of a legend hitting more than 200 goals for the club during a stint of around 10 years.

And that is your lot for another month or so. Any comeback, no matter what, the address is as ever:
nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk

NR (26/2)

PS. 1. Wanted – a home for one house-trained, large, black and grey stuffed Womble with shocking pink hair. Anyone who knows a charitable children’s environment where it might be appreciated, just let any committee member know.

2. There has to be a cut-off point somewhere and, with slight production problems too, my apologies for members possibly receiving this after the Macclesfield and Kidderminster matches have been played. Reports on those games will be in Number 46.