

SUSOT NEWSLETTER 55

HAVE you seen those trendy new heart monitors? You wear them on your wrist like a watch. They have suddenly become 'must have' for a new in-crowd of wannabe saddos, following the news that Roman Abramovich occasionally sports one. I don't know whether or not Ron has invested. Perhaps he was expecting to have a look at Roman's over a pre-match cocktail if all had gone according to plan. But, hopefully, he has steered clear. Because his readings would surely have been shooting off the scale and into Guinness Book of Records territory at various instances in recent weeks.

Take approximately 9.36pm on January 14. That was the moment, of course, when the final whistle blew at the McCain Stadium and a 900-strong Blue Army resignedly turned their backs on the Scarborough celebrations and meekly trooped back to their transport home. They had seen their dreams of an FA Cup fourth round tie at the Hall against the Stamford Bridge glitterati exploded in their faces.

Ron's mental calculator must have been playing havoc as he tried to come to terms with just what we had lost. £50,000 for reaching round four, £265,000 for live Sky TV, 50 per cent of the gate receipts from a 12,500 sell-out, extra executive box cash, advertising and sponsorship revenue, pages of favourable national press publicity. I know *The Sun* was falling over itself to get its name on the Scarborough shirts for match day. £50,000? No problem, guvnor. Always a great backer of lower league sides, after all! And what about the replay?! Grown men are not supposed to cry. But if Ron had found a quiet corner and wept buckets, he could have been forgiven. From mixing with millionaires, in one fell swoop we were suddenly back mixing with Mansfield.

Then just six days later our heroes turn in a remarkable display to trounce QPR in the LDV Vans Southern Area semi-final, the Essex Cup Final is on as C** U strike silver and suddenly the Millennium Stadium is beckoning – along with another potential little pot of gold. Ron is surely all aflutter once more, pound signs revolving before his eyes. But we all know anything can happen with Blues. Will it be third time lucky in the final? Can the droids from up the A12 be dumped? We certainly need to keep it close in the first leg on February 10, as the last thing we want for the return on the 24th is a deserted Hall and our hopes already floundering around in the dust. It's simply back on the SUFC rollercoaster to find out what happens – and in the meantime, we could desperately do with a few more league points and a hot-shot. Did we really miss out on Jamie Cureton? A major blow.

While finances at the club may have looked to be on more of an even keel of late, it was rather disconcerting to see Geoffrey King announcing in the QPR programme: "The results for the year ending 31st July are not good. But I am not prepared at this stage, not until the audit is sent off, to say any more on the matter." He also looked forward to us having a new manager in situ 'by the end of the season'. Is he 'avin' a larf? By that time, Tilly will have endured the longest-running temporary appointment in the history of football. Let's get it sorted. The York display, in particular, suggested we are currently in a highly disconcerting state of 'drift'. Rumour at least has it we have been looking west again. Better looking than going, I suppose.

UNDoubtedly, the uncertainty over Fossetts Farm never exactly breeds a feeling of warm contentment, a sense all is right with the world. But the three-day B&Q planning appeal has now been held and we must wait to see if the inspector charged with reporting back to His Majesty Two Jags by February 9 will fall off the fence on the side of the forces of progress or opt to get into bed with K****S. Not a pleasant prospect I should imagine. The final 'yea' or 'nay' should be unveiled around April time.

It's good to see Lincoln City, now run by their Trust, about to announce a small profit on the past year at their AGM later this month. York and Brentford are making a good fist of it, too. But overall there currently seems to be a growing number of supporters at various clubs putting out the begging bowls. Darlo are deep in it and the recent court hearings involving George Reynolds would have been hilarious were the Quakers' problems not so serious. He really should have stuck to safecracking. Had Darlo's new stadium had a 10,000 rather than 25,000 capacity, it seems the club's current financial state may not have been so parlous. Is 16,000 now pushing it for us? We'll see. No problems for Canvey, though. Castle Point Council are fully backing their plans for a new multi-million pound stadium at Waterside Farm. Anyone fancy a ground share?

Your Trust committee last met on January 26, when, with Chris Berry surprisingly running a little bit late, it was decided in his absence to award him, Rosemary, Thomas and Ben honorary life membership for their years of suffering in running the Trust's travel operation – especially in the wake of the stunning Scarborough success, which saw Chris fielding at least 350 phone calls. We planned to keep it a secret and make some sort of special presentation. But Paul FitzGerald, also unavoidably tardy, was not privy to the initial discussions and quite inadvertently let the cat out of the bag. Still, no harm done. Chris was happy to accept on behalf of the Berry clan and no one deserves the recognition more. Their efforts on behalf of the Trust have been immense.

Next up, the Shrimpers Bar. Terry Jeffreys and Geoffrey King have been corresponding like a couple of Edwardian sweethearts on the issue. GK has acknowledged the need for better match day staffing and the availability of an extra till to reduce the clamour for service during the busiest times. Our offer of Trust volunteers to work behind the bar rather than drink in front of it remains under consideration. But waitress service is off the menu. Terry has suggested an end to the special offers and explained that the recent problems meant he did not feel able to extend our usual invitation to York fans to sup to their heart's content. A number of QPR followers were also turned away. It was hoped that any outstanding difficulties would be resolved in time for the visit of Cambridge United on February 7, whose many supporters we do want to invite into the Shrimpers. Terry will also be asking GK to do a bit of on-site research about 30 minutes before kick-off on a match day, when the venue is at its fullest, rather than popping in at significantly quieter periods.

As previously mentioned, the Scarborough jaunt was superbly handled by Chris Berry, backed up by the rest of the Berry brigade and his fellow lieutenants Paul Yeomanson and Trevor Bashford. For a day in the life of Coach 8, see below. But all the nine coaches we took needed manning and the following Trust braves took it on themselves to take command: Coach 1: Chris and Thomas Berry; Coach 2: Trevor Bashford and Martin Cranmer; Coach 3: Paul and Jenny Yeomanson; Coach 4: Matt Overall and James Quinn; Coach 5: Robert Craven and Mark Wallis; Coach 6: Kevin Feasey and Alan Perry; Coach 7: Paul Marshall and Peter Brock; Coach 8: Yours truly and Richard Coxell; Coach 9: Terry Jeffreys and Brian Cotgrove. A vote of thanks to all. Without its volunteers in every sphere, the Trust would be dead in the water.

Unlike aboard Coach 8, not all went totally according to plan on each vehicle. A couple of particular problems have required some serious post-trip discussion and important lessons have been learned. Should we be tasked with a similar operation in future (Cardiff on March 21?) we know exactly where we must be at our most vigilant. We would especially hate to think that any Trust travellers felt the laws of the land applied to others but not to them. For details of what should, we hope, be far less taxing trips to Colchester (match ticket holders ONLY, February 10), Leyton Orient (February 21, unless you are strolling), Boston (March 3) and Bristol Rovers (March 6), contact CB on 01702-558978 or 07703-898698. I understand the usually pleasant atmosphere on our coaches should at least be guaranteed for a while in the wake of a three-year ban from all grounds in the country being imposed on a certain United follower.

Anyone going to Colchester might like to bear in mind these key pieces of information gleaned from the Racing Post, who had a reporter at last weekend's 1-1 draw with Tranmere. 1) 'Layer Road is falling apart'. 2) With regard to atmosphere: 'I have heard more noise at a funeral'. So let's show them what backing really means.

YOU may be lucky and still able to nab one of what were just two tables left for the next Trust Quiz Night in the Shrimpers Bar following the Macclesfield clash on February 28. Or you may not. For any further info, please contact Alan Perry on alanperry4@hotmail.com or 01702-476458. Our Race Night, Magic Night and Bowling Night investigations should be concluded shortly.

Once we have got framing costs sorted, there should be some very attractive shirt displays appearing in the Shrimpers Bar. Don't forget, too, that if you wish to pen a piece of around 350 words for inclusion in the Hall of Fame / Shame, contact Jon-Paul FitzGerald on jphfitz@aol.com Remember your £20 donation at the same time.

The Quid A Goal take, up to and including the York game, now stands at £2,166.

Alan Perry is still looking for people willing to get involved in the planned 100 CLUB. A payment of £5 per-month, preferably by standing order, will put you in line for a weekly prize of £50 with a special £500 draw at Christmas. Out of more than 900 members we should be able to recruit 100 for this project, so contact Alan now

at either of his above addresses and he will provide you with an entrance form. Then just take it from there. Forms are also available at the Trust Stand in the Shrimpers Bar on match days.

Terry Jeffreys has been for a walk recently. Not just down to the shops, though. This was serious stuff – three trips covering the course to Brisbane Road, which he will be perambulating in earnest in one go on February 21, finishing, all being well, with a grand entrance on to the pitch in time for a pre-kick-off salute from all present. Terry will shortly be covering the route again from start to finish to prepare his ‘risk assessment plan’ for the boys in blue. He is reckoning on doing the 36 miles in about 8 hours, but will allow nine in case of unforeseen circumstances. Anyone considering joining him on the big day – departure from the Hall approx. 4.30am – should be doing similar training by now. If you were thinking of just turning up on the morning, **forget it**. Terry will also be looking for sponsors and this momentous effort for Trust funds has to be well worth supporting by as many of our number as possible. Contact Terry on terry.jeffreys@btinternet.com or ring 01268-523974.

Membership has hit the new dizzy heights of 970 (856 adults and 114 SJS). We are so tantalisingly close to that 1,000 mark, so if you know anyone who wants to join us get in touch now with membership secretary Paul Yeomanson on p.yeomanson@blueyonder.co.uk or ring 01702-302373. Membership costs just £7 for adults but you can now sign up to the end of February to our new LIFE package for £50 (for our e-mail brethren) or £75 (non-e-mailers, reflecting additional costs). From March the price will be £75 and £100.

Prices for the planned Chinese Night are proving a little more expensive than first thought, so we may well arrange another Indian evening first. Paul Yeomanson is continuing his calorie-packed probe.

Peter Baker, whose framed miniature programme displays feature in the Shrimpers Bar, is prepared to do individual orders for £25. Contact him through Terry Jeffreys.

MORE Trust designer gear is looming on the horizon. Following the unveiling of our successful polo shirt, our in-house fashion experts are looking at a Trust football shirt, which will be most generously sponsored by United’s away shirt sponsors Wyndham Plastics and Glass. The garment will be of the collared variety and should be a tasty addition to anyone’s wardrobe. Further details as and when.

But what of recent efforts on the field of play? Read on.

CHELTENHAM 1 SOUTHEND 1 (9/1/04): After all we said about Drewe, he pops up on 70 minutes with his first league goal of the campaign thanks to a perfect little set-up from Mark Gower. A suspension meant he could spend the next two games mulling over his strike and genning up on the offside law. Whaddon Road has never been a particularly happy hunting ground for us, but what looked a very fair travelling turn-out for a Friday night must have had their hopes right up. Sadly, we are so used to them being dashed that an equaliser in the last five minutes, when we always seem at peak vulnerability, cannot have come as much of a surprise. Leon Cort had vowed to break his goals duck pre-match. But we would all have preferred it had it been in the opposition net, rather than his own. Two more points blown and instead of rising above the Robins, we stayed below them in what is becoming a worrying spiritual home of 22nd place.

SCARBOROUGHED FOR LIFE – THE TRIP OF DOOM

SCARBOROUGH 1 SOUTHEND 0 (FA Cup, 3rd rd replay, 14/1/04)

As Ms P ran her fingers gently through my Number Four, all was right with the world and it seemed impossible anything could change it. I mean, what better way to prepare for a 532-mile Trust round trip to the wilds of outer Tykeland than with a designer job on the barnet performed by one of the borough’s star operators at a leading Leigh-on-Sea salon. The only drawback to my 10am appointment was that I was sitting in the Roots Hall car park by 10.50am – 70 minutes before the charge of Richard Coxell and myself, Coach 8, was due to depart

for the Yorkshire seaside. It's nice to be early, but that is pushing it. At least I was able to see how the other half live. For there, like a couple of mother hens, were Brian Wheeler and Brian Dear, gathering in their flock of customers who had opted for United's £160 'fly with the players' package. You could certainly pick out the fliers from the coachers. For a start, I don't think I know any Trust members who go anywhere to roar on the lads sporting a shirt, tie and double-breasted suit. Each to his own, though. You sensed a volcanic increase in Brian Dear's blood pressure as he waited for the final latecomers. But the four ne'er-dowells eventually poured out of a taxi and the 80 or so Sopwith Camel set exited the Hall for Stansted in two non-Supreme vehicles.

By now, the initial foot soldiers of the non-executive Blue Army were starting to turn up. Then the first coach arrived from the depot. We were in business. Suddenly there was No.8, its cartoon sign so skilfully done by Thomas Berry showing proudly in the front window. All aboard. I locked the car, heaved my weighty rucksack of provisions on to my shoulder (no motorway services rip-offs for me) and joined chief organisers Chris Berry and Paul Yeomanson for the divi-up of passengers on to the respective charabancs due to depart from the Hall. The amount of preparation done by these two Trust titans was huge in the wake of the £5-a-head United subsidy and one of the main reasons why we were able to get our eventual total of nine coaches on the road so smoothly. Typically, the rain had just resumed so it was a case of piling on the bodies a.s.a.p. The clear attractions of Richard and myself, plus drivers Ray and Robert, meant we had our 47 volunteers seated in quick time and, after I had commandeered the microphone to impart a few pieces of key info, we were on our way.

You could almost touch the desire for a Blues win amongst the travellers. Mr I couldn't make it but had still taken the time to ring me at 9am with a 'good luck' message. How we were longing for that chance to face Chelsea in round four. The plan was to get to Ferrybridge services at the junction of the A1 and M62, from where we would be escorted by the police straight to the McCain Stadium. It sounded good and the journey to Ferrybridge passed with little incident, other than the apparent loss of Coxell's new coat. Moira had snapped it up for him for a bargain basement tenner in the Primark sale and the sigh of relief was huge when it was finally discovered lurking deep in the recesses of the overhead rack. There was also time for some Trust fund-raising, with the raffle hauling in about £24. Prizes of the highly sought-after 'NOW 56' and a box of Maltesers were handed out, provided pre-departure by Alan Perry. The football quiz was first-rate but had only nine takers. It was staggering how many people declined the invitation to indulge by announcing: "I don't know anything about football." Eh? Eight entrants worked in pairs, while about five got their heads together in the Lee Venus 'Backseat Boys' line-up. And it was the Boys who ended up in joint top spot – and sharing the monster £7 first prize pot – after getting an excellent 23 right answers out of 25. The marking was done in the Ferrybridge restaurant. Then it was back on the road, as our awesome convoy was guided to its final destination. The police get plenty of stick these days, but the way they blocked off motorway junctions, roundabouts, traffic light crossings etc so we could pass through unhindered seemed a 45-mile masterpiece of slick professionalism.

Oh that the lads could have performed in a similar fashion. The pre-match atmosphere was electric in a 900-strong Army behind one goal, all clutching the voucher that should have guaranteed them a Hall spot for the visit of Claudio Ranieri's Premiership superstars, and a huge roar greeted the team on its appearance from the tunnel. But once we kicked off, the same problems were evident that hampered us in the first game. Serious flaws down the left side, a lack of telling pace, Mark Gower being pushed too far inside and too many hopeful lumps forward looking for the heads of Tes and Leon Constantine. I was on Leon Cort at 33s for the first goal, but when two early corners flashed straight past him and out for throws I sensed that was another pound in the bookie's pocket. Half-time came and there was still all to play for at 0-0. The tannoy announcer gave the crowd as 4,859 – and hoped we would all be back to see the next home game against Woking!

The second half saw United playing towards the faithful, whose backing was loud and unstinting. Poorly rewarded, too, sadly. Neil Jenkins sent in a left-foot effort from 15 yards which their keeper touched on to the bar, Tes went for power on the turn from six yards when just trying to hit the target may well have yielded better results and.....that was about it on the genuine threat front. But not so at the other end seven minutes from time. Jamie Stewart was caught out of position, they got in a great low cross and Mark Quayle earned the Seadogs the fortune that should have been ours by bundling the ball in from five yards. We had a couple of ineffective free-kicks, the final whistle sounded, the home fans went ape and the Army quietly left, not really wanting to believe what they had just witnessed. You could have heard a pin drop in the gents' toilet. There was simply nothing to say. We knew the team had not meant to lose. But after Yeovil, Harlow, Aylesbury, Kingstonian et al, could we not have done the business just this once? And yet again a big Cup trip had come and gone without us managing to score a goal. Coach 8 had a depressed air to say the least. Not even an

immediate screening of Jim Carrey starring in the video 'Bruce Almighty' could lift the air of despondency anything other than temporarily. We pulled up outside the Hall at 3am after a never-to-be-forgotten day – if not wholly for all the right reasons. Our passengers, none of whom gave a hint of trouble, departed on their way and Richard and I said our dejected goodbyes. Oh well, maybe next time. The vouchers made nice confetti, we got back before the air force and at least Ron did eventually thank us all for going. But Chelsea was what we wanted. We might have got stuffed or we might have stunned the world. It would just have been great for us to say we were there when it happened.

SOUTHEND 0 DONCASTER 2 (17/1/04): Trypanosomiasis. Bit of a mouthful. Easier to pronounce as 'sleeping sickness'. Not known to be rife in the south east of England but a minor outbreak clearly struck the region between 3.03pm and 3.07pm on this particular day as we sank serenely to our ninth home defeat of the season in what proved a distinctly unlucky 13th home league fixture. Forsooth, that doth smack of relegation form, methinks. Donny's army of Geoff Boycott soundalikes were out in force and must have outnumbered the homers in the Shrimpers about four to one. On kicking off, it had all started so well, with three corners in quick succession as we burst out of the traps against the Tyke high-fliers seemingly determined to consign the misery of the McCain to the furthest recesses of the memory. But Leo Fortune-West knows he is all but guaranteed a goal at the Hall every time he trots down the tunnel. And he did not have long to wait. Routine corner, defence enjoying 40 winks, Leo hardly marked, Darryl rooted, flicked header, 1-0. It was now that we put in a Villa-style spot of dozing at a free-kick. We expected Donny to wait while we got our act together. Instead, the ball was played swiftly down the right, flashed across and then into the net in the mere blink of an eye. 2-0. The next 38 minutes were pretty even, while the second 45 Darryl could have spent on a sun lounger as we threw everything at Rovers but with nothing to show for it and confirmed ourselves as the current LOWEST home league goalscorers in the Nationwide League with a pitiful 11. The exit of Tes, hobbling off yet again, and the unfortunate Lewis Hunt – why was he switched from centre-back? – proved a godsend in a way. On came messrs Kightley and the hugely under-used Steven Clark to provide us with some pace and some options other than just trying to find the heads of a big front two. That tactic has got us nowhere this season, least of all at Scarborough, so WHY persist with it? Welcome aboard Mark Bentley. Not a debut to relish, though, with a booking thrown in for good measure. By the way, can someone adjust the Frank Walton Stand clock? It is four minutes fast. The high priest of pessimism, better known as Mr I, attended with an East Green seat ticket marked N88. Only one problem – Matt Marsh's season ticket is for.....N88. Chaos reigns.

SOUTHEND 4 QPR 0 (LDV Vans, Southern Area semi-final, 20/1/04): It would take the combined sleuthing powers of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Columbo, Morse, Perry Mason, Jack Frost, Miss Marple and Helen Mirren as that detective in Prime Suspect to solve this mystery. How can a team 22nd in the Third Division and with a home record that could be described as 'abysmal' at best not only beat but *roust* a side second in the Second Division and already looking guaranteed promotion? QPR are a very useful outfit, as their 2,000 travelling fans expected to have proved. The last time Danny 'Brick' Shittu appeared at the Hall with Blackpool he played us on his own. Yet once Leon Con neatly fired us in front from Mark Gower's cross, that was it. Wherever you looked we were on top. Darryl had one weak shot on target to save all night. Messrs Cort and Warren had their safest game of the season. Jupp, despite having his plums painfully rearranged, and Stewart sewed up the flanks. Maher and Smith snapped away superbly. Clark and Gower were majestic out wide. Drewe won more aerial ball in the first 45 minutes than he has all season and was well backed up by LC. Performances even 50 per cent as good as this would have seen off Scarborough, Boston, Northampton, Orient and most others, which made it all the more frustrating. Steven Clark hit a superb second from Gower's brilliant long ball down the left, Drewe headed the third after Gower got to the byline and then added a tap-in as Rangers' keeper Chris Day spilled a Cortie header. Two-thirds of the Rangers fans had disappeared by this time as taunts of 'Can We Play You Every Week?' drifted round Roots. A show of such quality, in fact, they made a video of it – yours from the club shop for £9.99. Now for God's sake let's show the rest of the Third Division, as well as C** U, that this is the real deal Blues – and we are not to be messed with. One final thought – where was Bashers when they called for an FA qualified back-up official? Rumours circulated he might have felt incapable of handling the numbers on the substitutes' board and so opted to keep a low profile.

MANSFIELD 1 SOUTHEND 0 (24/1/04): Back to reality. Field Mill instead of Jimmy Floyd. Being on NoW duty, I only saw the crucial spot-kick on TV and have to say it looked about 50-50. The key thing was they scored it, rather than missed it! What I also noticed was that Iyseden Christie was sent free pre-penalty between Leon Cort and Mark Warren by Drewe's 45-yard power header back from inside their half from a Darryl goal-

kick! Brilliant. Drewe also allegedly missed a free header, while Steven Clark tried to blaze a seven-yard left-foot volley into an open net, missed the ball completely and saw the ball skew embarrassingly off his right ankle and out of the area. Costly. Stags boss Keith Curle declared: "Southend's position in the league was belied by their work-rate, commitment and desire." He might have added: "Luckily, in the league they do not seem to have clue where the opposition net is." Is that right Bashers lost another of his passengers – Jack Daniels?

SOUTHEND 0 YORK 0 (27/1/04): Fraternal affection can manifest itself in many ways. I showed it on this particular occasion by 'treating' my brother to a free ticket to what proved a dire 90 minutes as one of his birthday gifts. It would be fair to say on the final whistle that there was little deep gratitude in his expression of thanks. From QPR to this in seven days. The crowd dipped below 3,000 on a bitter evening and it would be fair to say that anyone wanting the cockles of their heart warmed had chosen the wrong venue in the Hall. Perhaps we should have kicked the 'wrong' way again to try to repeat the rip-roaring Rangers action. But that is just clutching at straws. Apart from Jay Smith's absence, there were no excuses for a performance that had 'Help!' written all over it. Let's not mince words. Clarkie and Drewe had nightmares. Or as Rickard Jnr declared: "We might as well have played Edgar Broughton." (Anti-establishment rock guitarist of the 70s). Meanwhile Leon Con's silver boots look as if they have given him a touch of Ben Abbeyitis. Our threat up front was just about nil. There was probably more life in Harold Shipman's bed sheets. If your service from the flanks is not good enough, simply pumping the ball forward to two ineffective big men DOES NOT WORK. Mark Gower and Kevin Maher did their level best to instil some threat and work ethic, while the reorganised defence held out relatively comfortably after the loss of Mark Warren and seeing the Minstermen twice rattle the bar in the first half. We have not scored at home in the league now, though, in six hours since November 22. Time for someone to wake up, smell the roses and admit: This cannot go on. The only thing sparkling on the pitch was the bubbly Ron handed to Trust travel supremo Chris Berry for services above and beyond the call of duty in getting our coach fleet up to Scarborough so superbly. Anyone looking for Trust travel details in the programme had a problem, though. We got directions to already played Mansfield – twice! The fearless four were on Leon Cort again for the first goal at 33s – I suspect for the last time.....

BURY v SOUTHEND (31/1/04) – Postponed. Tilly had scared us to death by declaring: "Tactically, things will remain the same." Was that two big front men, little threat? But we never got to find out thanks to Gigg Lane, the sacred sward of Benjy, being waterlogged. The Trust travellers had made it as far as Potters Bar before the news filtered through there was to be no match action this day. An honourable mention to each one. We now have three home games in the league, interspersed with the Os away. Anything less than eight points and we can start firing the distress flares, irrespective of what happens in the LDV Vans.

Interesting to see Mark Tinkler still playing what looks a key role at Hartlepool. And more interesting still to see Gavin Strachan alongside him. I have seen Strachan Jnr score a couple of useful goals this season – and he takes their spot-kicks. Strange that he looked such a complete duffer in his spell on loan with us last season. Perhaps we should have kept him just because he can take a penalty.

Other ex-Blue-spotting: Graeme Jones slotting in a couple of tricky-looking three-yarders for Boston. Are the goals there bigger than a barn door? And Leon Johnson coming on as a sub for Gillingham against Sheffield United and still looking as one-footedly woeful as ever. Plus Andy Rammell has retired at 36 because of a persistent knee injury. Pity we probably never really saw the best of him, as the service he used to get from out wide was more often than not simply atrocious.

To judge how we really are struggling this season I need only refer you to the £5-a-head SunSport Bores League half-time report. With each of the five combatants having played four games, Lincoln and Northampton have amassed 10pts, Bristol Rovers six and United and Carlisle one apiece. It will be no surprise if I announce I have already written off that potential little £20 pay day.

Afraid there is no SUFC 2004 calendar up on my home office wall this year. Something was seriously lacking from the rather bland £5.99 player pix this time round – some ladeeeeez! Call me a sad male chauvinist if you like, but I think most red-blooded Shrimpers boys would find the 2004 Max Power production far more to their liking – even at £7.99. Well, it was £7.99 but I have recently seen it at £3.99 in a sale. Damn.

CERTAIN members of United's first-team squad have always effortlessly attracted the most pulchritudinous members of the opposite sex down the years. Or like to think they have. And news reaches me of a spectacular conquest by one of our current heroes before he arrived at the Hall. It seems this player effortlessly pulled a notorious football groupie. But far from her patch being the rich pastures of the Premiership, I understand she did most of her best work in the penalty area at.....Enfield Town.

I see Sir Stanley has managed to keep himself in the headlines, despite being passed over for the cast of 'I'm A Non-Entity, Get Me Out Of Here'. His attempts to justify giving Ulrika a good smack in a Paris bar during the 1998 World Cup came over as rather embarrassing. Sorry, Stan, hitting a woman is a no-no, end of story. And while Gazza was reckoned to be simply too unstable to join the jungle fun and games, TV bosses reckoned Stan's moods and sulking might make for dull, rather than compulsive, watching. An insider allegedly said: "It would be career suicide for Collymore to go on that show. It would prove to the world what a p***k he is." Charmed, I'm sure. So we ended up instead with 'Queen' Jennie Bond and Neil 'Proper Geezer' Ruddock.

The contingency plan in case of a Fossetts blow-up or any other financial disaster hitting SUFC and putting its future under even graver threat is being reviewed constantly. Potential venues for events such as a major SOS meeting have been looked at and Jon-Paul FitzGerald has even written a most eloquent letter to the headmaster of Westcliff High School to enquire about the potential availability of their facilities. Nothing like being prepared, even if we obviously hope it never happens.

Meanwhile, replies have been pouring in from board members to Paul Fitz's enquiries concerning their views on a Trust member joining their number. Actually, when I say pouring in, I mean.....three. That's Frank Van Wezel, Paul Robinson and the divine Ms Vine. Almost needless to say, each has stated they will raise the issue with the board, but none has actually said where they stand personally on the matter. By choice or edict?

REMEMBER Danny O'Shea? A pretty fair defender from the 80s. He is still in the game – as assistant coach at Arsenal. Sounds like he has fallen on his feet. Perhaps even more so when you discover it is Arsenal.....Ladies! Anyone for a rubdown?

Reading the papers, you would think journalists liked nothing more than reporting stories concerning doshed-up soccer stars getting their comeuppance from the long arm of the law in the wake of a night of booze-fuelled 'high jinks'. But I regret to report that the tables have just been turned. For one of the doyens of the national football press, a man well known for giving his opinions on the likes of Jimmy Hill's Sunday Supplement on Sunday mornings on Sky, has just been invited to do 14 months at Her Majesty's Pleasure following a fracas in a London wine bar. It seems he objected when his other half decided to start showing off some rather fetching new lingerie she had just purchased, somebody else stuck their nose in and it all kicked off from there. Cheers!

Kevin Maher has made his £50 charity donation following his recent Trust Player of the Month award to Cancer Research UK.

Talking of fund-raising, quite a few members may be unaware that former England Test cricketer and Test Match Special pundit Trevor Bailey not only played for Essex with bat and ball but Blues as well. He even did a stint as a director. Trust member Peter Butler would like to see some sort of Trust table got together for the dinner-dance affair at the Cliffs Pavilion on February 27 to launch Essex Cricket Week (and, boy, these days it needs launching), where an 80th birthday toast to Trevor will be proposed. It is lounge suits and £45 a head, but anyone interested can get further information from our font of all knowledge, Terry Jeffreys.

How's this for T*t of the Month? Twee, fop actor Orlando Bloom reckons he is a football fan and to prove it announced recently that he was switching allegiance from M*****r U****d to Real Madrid because Becks had moved there. He fawned pitifully: "Since Beckham now plays for Real Madrid, I think they're cool." Well, Orlando (what sort of a name is that?) I am sure you won't mind if we think you are a complete and utter *****. Fill the letters in for yourselves.

MARK Townsend has been in touch to reveal that it was he and a gang of mates representing SUFC fans on Soccer AM. Mark (the one in the wig) was joined by Dave Baker, Jamie Sinclair, Andrew Blackman, Steve Burgess, Trickie and Ranson. So now you know.

Brentford have had enough of Leo's red cards, cancelling his contract 'by mutual agreement'. It's Rushden and Diamonds next up for our former rough diamond centre-back.

Anglia TV have got a new football-based game show on the move. Called 'Sporty Facts', it is supposed to allow the players and fans of the region's teams to come together and do battle in light-hearted fashion. Initial filming will be in Norwich next month. If you think you might be interested in taking part, contact Paul Yeomanson.

I did not see the punishment handed down on that piece of flotsam who attacked Trust president Sir Teddy Taylor MP in Southend. What sort of a 35-year-old coward beats up a pensioner? I'd have opted for a few strokes of the cat o' nine tails on the centre circle about 10 minutes before kick-off at a forthcoming home game. I suspect he more likely got five minutes' community service or a windsurfing holiday in Barbados.

Following last month's mention of the nag Saafend Rocket and its 5-1 win at Ludlow, Trust member Robin Michel would like to know if anyone has a clue what happened to a horse called Southend United, which must have cost a few Blues fans a packet in the early 90s. I suspect he is sharing the same supermarket shelf marked 'cat food' as Shergar. But if anyone has the true story, let me into the secret and I will reveal all.

Biggest joke in football right now has to be the winter break. What a complete and utter waste of time. Sven twitters and the Premiership chairman go all ga-ga. Yes, Sven. No, Sven. Three bags full, Sven. He reckons the January break will ensure England's stars are not knackered for tournaments at the end of the season. That is like saying you will still be bouncing around from your August summer holiday at Christmas. Tired? After doing about three minutes of actual running in every 90 minutes? It would be fascinating to know what Premiership fans, who will be left twiddling their thumbs for a couple of weeks, think about it all. But, of course, no one has thought to ask them. Still, if any of them fancy a day out on a blank, the Hall will always beckon...

FINALLY, I understand we could be in line for automatic promotion. There is talk that the Football League is ready to scrap the present First Division next season and rename it the 'Football League Championship' – thus dumping 116 years of history. Needless to say it is all about the great god marketing and trying to compete with the Premiership, with the idea coming from ad agency TBWA who, more than likely, know about as much about football and its traditions as I do quantum physics. It is all part of a League 'brand revitalisation exercise', mainly designed to throw a bone to the current First Division clubs as a fair few of them wallow in their own self-made cash-strapped zones. The Second Division would become the new First and the Third the Second. The 'FLC' clubs will even have a new director of their own, just recruited from a brewery firm. The League admit that people's current vision of the Football League as it stands is very positive. League commercial director Richard Masters declared: "People see League football as community-based, as great value for money, as embodying tradition, as more family-orientated than the Premier League and more competitive than the Premier League." So why try to turn the League into what its fans detest? The 72 chairmen will be meeting on April 29 to discuss the revamp agenda, with final decisions to be taken in June. It seems the ad agency involved, TBWA, came up with the oh-so-classy FCUK rebrand for clothing firm French Connection. If that is the sort of quality they plan to bring to the beautiful game, let us hope Ron and Co have the guts to tell them to 'FCUK Off!' when the time comes. (Don't even bother asking if the fans have been consulted. You know the answer already.....)

Right, that is your lot for another month. Any observations, queries, slaggings-off etc, you know just what to do: e-mail nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk Simple.

NR (3/2).

PS1. We still seek The Sneak.

PS2. Sorry, you will have to wait a while longer for the Ian Atkins / Blues old boy tale. I know it must be difficult, but bear with me.