

SUSCT NEWSLETTER 56

Invasion of Wales bumper edition

WHEN the conversation gets round to great journeys of the world, the focus tends to be on the likes of following the tracks of the Orient Express, journeying from one side of the States to the other or circumnavigating the Earth by air and making as many luxury stops as you can along the way.

It is safe to say the trip from Southend to Cardiff is never mentioned. But as far as SUFC is concerned, that 211-mile jaunt for the LDV Vans Trophy Final against Blackpool on Mother's Day, March 21, has to be right up there with the most significant that the club and its supporters have ever made. Win or lose, and what an achievement it would be if it was to be the former, a great day out – or weekend for some – should be on the cards as, hopefully, up to 20,000 people from the borough and its environs head for the Millennium Stadium. Some, like we SUSCT members, will be hardened Blues addicts familiar with the frustrations and, just occasionally, the celebrations that following United season in, season out can bring. Others, no doubt, will be sitting in their seats simply wanting Southend to win – once they have discovered what colours we play in. Though with the planned new silver-grey kit due to be sported by our brave boys – and there are many supporters disgusted we will not be in our historic blue – one or two regulars might fail the ID test as well. Victory might even see a few of the one-off brigade tempted to return for the more humdrum fare of the utterly crucial battle for Nationwide League survival, of which encouraging news later.

Needless to say, the Trust has been at the forefront of the plans for the 'event' ever since we conquered C** U. Phone and e-mail lines have been red-hot, meetings have been convened. Paul Yeomanson and Chris Berry have been spearheading the huge travel operation that has swung effortlessly – well, almost – into action. It speaks volumes that United opted to go with our tried and tested team rather than involve outsiders. And if you want to contact our dynamic duo with bookings or queries, that includes for the all-girlie 'Female Flier' (gossip obligatory), Chris is on 01702-558978 or 07703-898698 (NO texts) and Paul on 01702-302373 or 07860-825127. Secretary Terry Jeffreys has been liaising here, there and everywhere on tickets for Trust members and working on our commemorative badge, while treasurer Craig Fillary has been trying to fill his £85 'Weekenders Wagon' (ring him on 01702-512169 if you are interested in travelling down on the Saturday and staying overnight) and chairman Bashers has been dipping in and out as work allows. As for the rest of the committee, most have been available if required to try to do whatever needs doing – especially, along with the welcome presence of the likes of Jenny Yeomanson, manning the Trust's voucher 'office'.

However you are heading west, you may well have your match ticket by now – either in a location of your choice or with the Trust party determined to give it plenty of vocal from our block booking behind one goal. Thanks to United for agreeing to that. The general sale did not appear to degenerate into the feared mad scramble, especially with all the supposedly required form filling. Personally, I would like to have seen just a tad more consideration given to season ticket holders and those hardy true Blues in the 4,107 crowd v Macclesfield. What happened to the other 15,000? Yet it would be churlish to carp too much. United's backroom have probably been as overwhelmed by the occasion as most of us and have also been given no choice but to fall in line with the stifling 'rules and regulations' of both the Football League and the Millennium Stadium.

OUR biggest task on the day, of course, is getting all our passengers to the venue and back safe and sound. United will be hosting the £200-a-head flying school, while the £35 and £45 passengers on 'Von Berry's Express' and the 'Southend Belle' trains – what a success story to fill two – will have ample club-provided security to ensure nothing untoward should occur. By the time you read this we will know if our battle to make the second train a 12-coacher has succeeded. We had 300 prospective journey-makers waiting to fill the 180 places that would be available. For most of us, though, it will be how our flotilla of coaches performs that really counts.

Remember that, train or coach, you MUST have a travel voucher costing £20 for Trust members, £ 15 concessions and £25 non-members. There will be NO pay on the day. If we went that route and our cash was nicked, it would make the Brinks Matt job look like a minor misdemeanour! So if you have not already done so, secure your voucher now from whoever is manning our location each day during ticket sales at Roots Hall or on the Lincoln coach or by phone as above or at the Trust stand v Swansea. But DON'T leave it any later than Wednesday, March 17th.

On March 21, coach departure is 6am sharp from the Hall and 6.30am sharp from Basildon Bus Station. After the game we shall be asking everyone to return to their particular vehicles immediately. The trains will leave at 6.30am approx from Southend Central, with pick-up stops at Benfleet and Pitsea.

The Trust has been liaising closely, as usual, with DC Richard Spooner, who attended the committee meeting on March 8 to update us on various items about which all our fans need to be aware.

He stressed NO alcohol is permitted on board either our coaches or trains and those in charge of both our methods of transport will be ensuring that edict is strictly adhered to. Richard made it clear that Wales Police are very hot on football offences. Appear drunk on entry to the ground and you will NOT get in. Ticket touts face a £150 fine and a three-year banning order. The regulations will be 'rigorously enforced' by both the local constabulary and stewards at the Millennium Stadium e.g. your ticketed seat is the only one you are allowed to sit in. It may sound officious, but this once we are going to have to put up with it with good grace. There will be NO tickets on sale on match day. For those going by car, be warned. You must follow a specific route into the city and parking is likely to be impossible in Cardiff centre and extremely difficult outside it. Give yourself ample time to get sorted. Better still, read the Traffic Wales website on www.traffic-wales.com or check the routes to be followed on the Football League website – www.football-league.co.uk The likelihood is you will be directed to park and ride areas, with a £5 parking fee and free shuttle bus from there.

IF you think it all sounds negative, wrong. Richard is more than happy with the way our organisation has gone so far and declared: "My congratulations to you." Let's keep it that way. Anyone who thinks they can flout the guidelines every other Trust member is following is unlikely to get a very sympathetic hearing.

By March 9 we had nearly 17 coaches filled with 738 passengers, of which only 221 were members. We are expecting a members rush over the weekend of the 13th / 14th. We also have other coach irons in the fire. Those who end up travelling on non-Supreme vehicles can rest assured that they will have the usual 'luxury' options such as toilet facilities and video.

For all the latest information, remember to check out the Trust website – www.shrimperstrust.co.uk - or visit the Trust stand in the Shrimpers at the Swansea game. United's website is also bound to have all the necessary – www.southendunited.co.uk - especially on remaining ticket availability, as long as you want to reveal all your secrets before being granted access.

Most fans who attend the match will be looking to buy a souvenir programme – even at £5! But don't forget to put aside £3 as well to purchase the Trust's own 48-page full-colour brochure produced with all the enthusiasm we have come to expect from Paul Napper, Dave Scriven, Robert Craven and Matt Wallis and printed by United's programme printers. This is a truly excellent piece of work, with all the facts, features, info and interviews you could want – plus, of course, a good plug for the Trust. Their only error was to be too modest to give themselves a credit. Snap one up early as the initial print run of 1,000 is likely to go like hot cakes. Robert will also be starring on TV's 'Look East' news programme as the fan they will be following throughout the big matchday experience. Next stop 'I'm A Celebrity.....'

Our kit on the day will be sponsored by Martin Dawn plc (is that a shock?), our pre-match suits will be by Burton's (let's pray we don't go for one) and our match mascot will be nine-year-old Michael Day (who he?). The match referee will be Roy Pearson of County Durham.

Members have been flocking to the cause from all over the world, though Jamie Reeves' brave effort to make it from Singapore, where he is that nation's answer to Martin Tyler, eventually ended in heroic failure.

WE also must not forget, as far as travel goes, we have one or two key away league fixtures coming up – Lincoln (Tue, March 16), Carlisle (Sat, March 27) and Huddersfield (Sat, Apr 10). To book coach seats to those games, contact Chris Berry ONLY on his previously given numbers.

Meanwhile, hallelujah, the excitement generated by our monumental piece of history-making has led to the increase in Trust numbers which has seen us at last crash through the 1,000 barrier. Up to an incredible 1,064, in fact (918 adults, 146 SJS). From a tiny acorn when the Southend United Independent Supporters Club first formed a committee under Tony Hall back in October 1997, the mighty oak of the SUSCT / Shrimpers Trust has grown. Long-suffering Trevor Bashford is the only one still left from those very early days, with yours truly, Richard Coxell and Chris Berry next in line of veteran status. But plenty of people have put a mountain of work into making the Trust what it is today – the bedrock of the Southend United fanbase. The 1,000th member through the door is known, but has not yet been informed as some bonuses are being sorted out. Ergo, you will have to wait to discover the identity, too. Our life membership package (cost now £75 and £100) has already attracted 20 takers. Welcome aboard for ever to Matthew Weir, Martin Leonard, Tim Clayton, Geoff Manning, Gill Manning, Matthew Marsh, Terry Jeffreys, Peter Butler, John Everett, Julian Ambrose, Melvyn Dearlove, Gregory Dearlove, Hugh Cumberland, Darren Posnack, Ian Harrison, Andrew Porter, Rachel Porter, Brian Jeeves, Brian Smith and P Richards. All membership enquiries should be directed to Paul Yeomanson on his phone numbers as above or to p.yeomanson@blueyonder.co.uk

Spare a thought for Steven Clarke, supremo of Southend's away sponsors Wyndham Plastics and Glass. He booked an anniversary trip to the Caribbean based around the LDV final being on March 28. By the time he discovered the date had been switched to the 21st it was too late and now he cannot attend. Sounds to me a good enough reason for a quickie divorce!

One thing about a big one-off date on the football calendar is that you want to ensure you never forget it, hence the football fan's desperate need to stock up on some merchandise. Needless to say this can be a very nice little money-spinner, as those at United whose job it is to be aware of such things realise only too well. But where do you draw the line between profit / maximising revenue and rip-off? For that line is fine indeed. I'll be handing over a few quid for something, but not £43 for the rugby top I would probably have liked most. My SUSCT commemorative football shirt, however, is a £25 delight.

There was another great journey for the Trust to salute on February 21 when our four walkers to Orient – Terry Jeffreys, Hugh Cumberland, Simon Smith and David Tubb – did us proud. They left Roots Hall at 5am, with Simon and David completing 22 miles and Terry and Hugh making it all the way to the Brisbane Road centre circle. Their gutsy achievement should bring in at least £1,500 for Trust funds and was a fantastic effort by all four of them. If you pledged some financial support, please pay up when you are asked. The United players contributed £115, a much appreciated gesture. Thanks, too, to Brian Dear for the supply of Mars Bars and crate of water and to Paul Yeomanson for running the support vehicle / mobile massage parlour.

NEXT an understanding word about Sir Stanley. Colly has been caught 'dogging' and shown the red card by BBC radio. No wonder he was after the United hot-seat. He must have seen huge potential in the Hall car park, though I understand there is absolutely no truth in scurrilous allegations that he really wanted David Pleat as his No 2. A man's sexual peccadillos are entirely his own business and for the privacy of his own attic. But if you know any Trust males with a penchant for fishnets, bin bags and satsumas, do tell. Otherwise, let's just enjoy all the latest tawdry goings-on from Leicester, where the Foxes squad's antics in La Manga make you wonder yet again how long these overpaid, boozed-up Premiership yobbos would get away with letting down the nation's game if we had an FA with some teeth running football instead of just a bunch of gutless, time-serving amateurs.

It has been difficult, but the committee has tried to focus on one or two other matters apart from Sunday week and here is a rundown on what has occurred at the last two meetings on February 16 and March 8.

Three brains of the Trust – Paul Napper, Paul Yeomanson and Trevor Bashford – will be teaming up with Steve Tilson for a new Sport Quiz on Anglia TV. Details of their performances as and when.

The Trust has taken delivery of its own photocopier, which United have generously allowed to be installed in the Commercial Department. Over at Blues in the Community, Frank Banks is still beavering away tirelessly – and

unrecognised – so once again we are pushing to try to get him the sort of award that appreciates all the effort he has put into this vital work down the years.

Numbers for the 100 Club are increasing slowly but surely. If you want to check out the rules and regulations, they are now on the Trust website. Otherwise, to sign up contact Alan Perry (alanperry4@hotmail.com / 01702-476458) or Bashes (01245-362742).

A plea to video fans. Is there anyone out there with the facility to convert Betamax Ordinary video to VHS? If so, we would very much like to hear from you. Or, rather, techno titan Dave Scriven would on 01268-757948 or e-mail themailmaster@benfleet276.freeserve.co.uk

ALAN Perry reported that Quid A Goal now totalled £2,872.50, with physio John Stannard promised £1,100 of that sum for equipment. It was agreed that if QAG made a substantial profit, the surplus should be offered to the new full-time boss for items that may be of use to the squad.

Monitoring of the Shrimpers Bar continues. It is still not perfect, but a new till and some extra staff are now in place to try to get the pace of service stepped up for all our customers.

Paul FitzGerald has not only got his sights set on the directors, he now has sponsors lined up for a grilling over how they view the possibility and desirability of having a Trust member on the United board.

The last Quiz Night was another soaraway success, raking in a new record surplus of £652.50 from 12 tables of 91 competitors in attendance at the Shrimpers Club on February 28. Alan Perry, as ever, did a great job of organisation, with Paul Yeomanson doing his familiar bit as well. Guy Rickard made it after a late attendance scare to do his usual outstanding job as quiz master, while yours truly's mental gymnastics on the marking front were a wonder to behold. Overall victory went to the grey matter brigade of Paul and Donna Collins, Chris, Sheila and David Mallam and Rob McMullan, who earned themselves a nice bottle of alcoholic grape juice each. The Feasey gang were second and the Mr G bunch third. Mr G was also ecstatic at being first out of the hat in the raffle and snapping up a DVD player that he will most generously be giving to his mum for her birthday.

The proposed 10-pin bowling night, the Race Night and the Curry Night are all moving ahead and we should shortly have a date for at least one of those social gatherings. Bit of bad news for the ladies. The aromatherapy night has had to be dropped, but efforts are still in hand to get a 'females only' get-together sorted for the not too distant future. Another prospective date has gone up in a puff of smoke as well – the magic night.

Treasurer Craig Fillary reports he has never had so much money sloshing round our accounts, though the cost of coach travel is likely to have to be reviewed next season. So start saving a bit harder.

IT was interesting to see in a poll on one of the fans' websites that the split wanting league survival rather than LDV glory was 4 to 1. Our most recent results, with the odd exception, suggest we should be able to enjoy both. Read on to see how we have been performing of late, with, understandably, a rather more in-depth look at our shoot-outs with the old enemy.

SOUTHEND 1 CAMBRIDGE UTD 0 (7/2/04): Our first double since we did Oxford 14 months ago. Lawrie Dudfield could not have marked his debut on loan from Northampton in any better way than with his flicked up-and-over header. Who cares whether or not he had a clue where it was going? Plenty of 'fascinating' pre-match chat in the Shrimpers Bar. It was said one Cambridge fan had put £100 on Jermaine Easter for the first goal at 12-1. A major blunder. Apparently the QPR videos have been selling well. One wag claimed Drewe had snapped up the entire supply. Mark Gower received his SUSCT Player of the Month award for January from SJS member Joseph Rutter and then it was off we go against a side boasting at the time the joint-best away record in the division along with Doncaster and Hull. A good omen for us was their inclusion of our 'lucky mascot' Daniel Webb. And he did not let us down, with a first-half header wide when, with Darryl stranded, it looked a lot easier to hit the target. We should have had the game signed, sealed and delivered long before our 43rd-minute clincher – thanks chiefly to the dangerous running and prompting of Jay Smith. It was sickening the way he was ruthlessly put out of action for the season by Warren Goodhind's crass tackle from behind six minutes earlier. We have missed him. Nice to see Frank Banks thanking the Trust in the programme for its £1,400 sponsorship of United's special needs scheme. Our pleasure.

COLCHESTER 2 SOUTHEND 3 (LDV Vans Southern Area Final, 1st leg, 10/2/04): Pure, bloody, unadulterated bedlam exploded inside the shambolic dump that is Layer Road to greet every Blues strike as we showed the A12 upstarts what pride and passion is all about. C** U deserved a good trouncing if for nothing else inflicting on those of us on the away terrace a lavatorial set-up that surely made the Black Hole of Calcutta look like the Savoy. There was the odd niggling fear we might not be able to repeat the performances which despatched Luton and QPR in earlier rounds – especially after Pinault’s seventh-minute rocket into the top corner had left Darryl with not a cat in hell’s chance. But with the whiff of the Millennium Stadium in their nostrils, the lads again made a mockery of our ludicrous league position and pulled out a crackerjack comeback marred only by Drewe’s daft dismissal. As ever, though, let’s tell the tale from the beginning – kicking off with a miracle to match that of Lazarus.

THE Berry coach was early. It should have been at Hadleigh Church at 16.45, so coming in sight of the pick-up point at 16.41, I almost collapsed with shock to see it parked up and waiting. When I say the Berry coach, its correct title, as the front window sign revealed, was the ‘Berry Love Bus’. Chris and Rosemary were celebrating 22 years together, though I hope this jaunt was not CB’s way of avoiding forking out for a treat! Our four-vehicle convoy gathered at Chelmsford Services, the other three coaches directed by Paul Yeomanson, Kevin Feasey and Matt Overall. Then it was away into the hell that is the A12 at rush hour. We picked up our police escort just past Kelvedon and were eventually directed into Colchester Fire Station. Here a posse of boys (and girls) in blue, or rather dayglo lemon, formed a reception committee the like of which I have not seen since I took a wrong turning on Berlin Ost station at the height of the Cold War. Fourteen officers, two cars, two vans and all just to ensure we were hooch free. Colchester must have been a burglar’s paradise this particular evening. No problems, thank goodness, and then it was straight to the ground.

I say ground, but Layer Road these days is basically an apology for a Football League venue. Facilities are nothing short of a total disgrace and the shallowness of the away end makes it imperative you get positioned early if you want to see all four corners of the action. No wonder they do not do hospitality. There is not enough room to swing a cat, let alone a full buffet. The Army began to exercise its vocal chords, exchanging banter with the Barside dements. Especially popular was the ditty involving grievous bodily harm being inflicted on a suitably restrained C** U fan. The atmosphere built nicely and by kick-off we were right up for it, only for that early setback to knock confidence just a little. Leon Constantine, though, got us roaring again 10 minutes later with a beautifully taken right-foot drive from 18 yards after a battling set-up from Tes. Slowly but surely, Blues then started to exert a grip on the game, with only the odd scare sprinkled in to worry us. Leon Cort must score some time, but here his 43rd-minute header from Mark Gower’s corner rattled a post. Luckily, the rebound landed perfectly on Drewe’s forehead for a routine nod-in. Cue ecstatic mayhem. Credit to C** U for laying on a highly entertaining half-time penalty competition for a group of youngsters from both sides, with the three mascots – Sammy, Elvis and Eddie the Eagle – all playing a highly creditable part. Then the fun began again for real and after 68 minutes we found a comic hero in C** U’s gaffe-prone keeper Simon Brown. He let Tes’s left-foot drive slip through his fingers and between his legs and we sucked it into the net to massive acclaim. Enter Drewe. Booked earlier for yet another elbow, he stupidly kicked the ball away following an offside call and promptly saw a red card from referee Paul Taylor. Perhaps Mr Taylor would like to tell us why a blatant act of dissent by Scott McGleish, disputing a first-half throw-in, went unpunished. C** U swiftly got a corner and dangerous sub Wayne Andrews, who DB may well have been marking, headed over Darryl. Carl Pettefer appeared as a sub for us and I was not the only one asking ‘Who?’ – not knowing we had snapped up the 22-year-old midfielder on loan from Pompey earlier in the day. It was nerve-jangling but, superbly marshalled by my Man of the Match Kevin Maher, we held on to the final whistle and maintained what we hoped would be a telling one-goal advantage. Back on the coach, with half of Colchester Police on patrol outside, the post-match mood was realistic rather than truly ecstatic. No one knows better than the faithful what it means to be let down. Nice bit of coverage on Sky TV news, where the presenter revealed his Third Division credentials by referring to Darryl ‘Flavahan’. The Echo’s pictures next day were abysmal. One goal shown – and it was C** U’s second! What about ours?

No-show roll call: Dean Allum (got his times wrong and turned up an hour late! Are you Berry in disguise?), Claire Smith (second time this season, you naughty girl), Steven Smith and non-members Dave Sumner, Lyn Cufley, Tom Cufley and David Pinkerton. Prepare for punishment.

SOUTHEND 3 KIDDERMINSTER 0 (14/2/04): Blues enjoyed a touch of London bus syndrome. No sooner had one double come along than another followed right behind. Kiddie had not won in eight, so that was a worry. But once we had made the breakthrough, apart from a rare scare we did not really look like letting this one slip as we bagged three more critical points in the dogfight to the death. We seemed, at last, to have found a penalty-taker, though that proved a false dawn. At least here Leon Constantine put away his two opportunities with aplomb, the first saving Lawrie Dudfield a very red face after he had nodded over from three yards not realising a push on Drewe had been rewarded by ref Tony Bates with a spot-kick. Before now Leon had fluffed his only previous 12-yard attempt, while with Orient. Our third saw the Dud cross low and one of their defenders finish convincingly. Overall a fair performance as we racked up back-to-back victories for the first time this season, though we were one light in the crowd as Mr I opted to Czech in for three days of tally-ho in Prague rather than check into the East Greens. And after Tuesday, I thought we might have lured in a few more than 3,716. It also pains me to linger on one undeniable truth. We played our best football in the last 15 minutes, once Drewe had been withdrawn. With DB's head no longer there to be found – and no one could question his 75 minutes of effort – we played the ball along the ground sweetly at times. The Dud in particular looked a hell of a sight happier, but that may have been thanks to the Trust splashing £8.99 to replace the Cambridge Man of the Match champagne he accidentally dropped while signing autographs. Daft dissent from Duncan Jupp earned him a booking, even dafter dissent from the Scouse-jabbering Danish pie-eater Jan Molby in the wake of the first penalty saw him banished to a seat quite close to Ron. I wonder if The Great Leader handed him a job application form. One last message: Oyyyyy! Purple and red. No!!!!!!!

SOUTHEND 1 COLCHESTER 1 - Agg 4-3 (LDV Vans Southern Area Final, 2nd leg, 17/2/04): Such a huge fixture that Sky Sports News did a preview from a workout at Boots and Laces. This is when you really know you have arrived. But only one question needed answering. Could we retain our advantage from the first leg and thus guarantee a massive day out for the town in the land of the sheep worriers? Is the sun hot? Is the Arctic cold? Never in doubt – much! With the local pubs shut on police advice, the Shrimpers was packed 70 minutes before kick-off. Sadly, running out of glasses did not help. The Far Post was no better. They ran out of beer, much to the chagrin of Messrs I and G. You could touch the tension all round the ground from early doors. I arrived at 6pm and already could only park up by Southend High School, so you knew something special was afoot. A nice Trust / SJS touch was a 'get well' card for Jay Smith, which a number of members signed as the minutes to kick-off ticked by. But the field of battle drew you like a magnet and the Hall stands were an awesome sight, packed wall-to-wall for once and with just a few hundred seats left vacant to separate the rival factions. This may not be the occasion to grumble, but where have half of them been all season? Yes, there are fans and 'fans'. Also our capacity is officially stated to be 12,306. But with the attendance given as 9,603, that figure today surely has to be nearer 10,306 as, apart from the swathe of seats separating the two sets of supporters, I could not see many vacancies anywhere else. Yet the official attendance v Canvey Island for the FA Cup meeting back in December 2000 was 11,402. Strange.

The pre-match build-up was almost an intrusion – yet very effective. A nice award from LDV Vans for demolishing QPR, John Innes once again belting out Nessun Dorma and Jeff Allen-Cox in over-the-top overdrive as he built up the 'gladiatorial' combat to come to a peak. Then, at last, the two teams appeared to a monumental roar. Nearly 10,000 sets of buttock cheeks clenched. The atmosphere could not have been any hotter in Lanzarote, where Richard Coxell was sunning himself with wife Moira. Very bad timing. Referee Michael Ryan blew his whistle. This was it, Blues. Seize the moment.

Three minutes – 0-1. Four swift, neat inter-passes put Kemal Izzet clear and his shot squeezed through Darryl into the bottom corner. Yet, bizarrely as it turned out, this possibly worked in our favour. The initial tension was immediately broken because we now had no option but to throw off the shackles and attack. Our one-goal advantage had gone, it had to be restored if we wanted to guarantee a Millennium Stadium date and there was only one way to go – forward! The lads picked up the baton and C** U's back-line suddenly found themselves well under the cosh. Drewe blew a three-yard header, Tes and Drewe fluffed when clean through, the latter instance ending with a Tes effort cleared off the line. Drewe thundered a 10-yard left-footer against a post. It was looking ominous – and so did they a couple of times on the break. But then came that 45th minute. Duncan Jupp crossed from the right, Leon Cort headed down to the penalty spot and, with C** U's Sam Stockley spark out and conveniently playing everyone onside, Drewe stepped in to nudge the ball past Calamity Brown from eight yards. A nanosecond's silence followed as every Blues fan in the ground took a vast intake of breath. Next followed a cacophony of noise as the strike was greeted with a bellowed mixture of both delight and relief.

Half-time saw a bloke called 'Jim' probably go the closest yet to winning the Fiesta before the Blue Belles danced out squeezed into their skintight little multi-coloured wet-look plastic numbers. Mr I was so excited by Ginger there were fears he might run on and join in. Away we went again. C** U did the majority of the early second-half pressing. Yet, as they tired after their FA Cup date at Bramall Lane, Tes blew the best chance of the night unmarked from eight yards. Drewe almost dropped us in it twice by p*****g about and trying to waste time, needlessly conceding possession on both occasions and giving them the chance to attack. But, glory be, we held on to make Cardiff on aggregate – and thoroughly deservedly. Our first major final in 98 years. No wonder the lads made the most of their laps of honour and the home fans just kept on applauding. Drewe got another sentimental Man of the Match award. For me, it had to be Kevin Maher or Mark Warren. Meanwhile, Ron must have been dancing a jig in the boardroom, with a fresh pot of gold up for grabs from the final, TV and merchandising in the wake of the Chelsea disappointment. It was just great to see a true occasion at the Hall for once, though, with a big crowd to give it some feeling, a good, trouble-free encounter and, for once, a victory to round things off. I will let Mr I sum it up. "It was a genuinely great night." Such a shame SunSport's Fixed Odds shyster and Barside Boy Andy 'Shot' Totham was kept away by work. He told me he hated missing seeing it proved that there really is only one team in Essex.....

LEYTON ORIENT 2 SOUTHEND 1 (21/2/04): How? How did we throw this one away? This setback dumped us back in the bottom two and left anyone thinking a place in the LDV Vans Final suddenly meant guaranteed league safety having to wise up. Especially as this was the first of SIX away fixtures in our next eight games. Mrs Berry kept it in the family by running a nice, tight, only fractionally late coach and the queue for the burger bar at 2pm signalled a bumper Brisbane Road Blue Army would be in place. It was like the good old days – pay on the gate and stand on a nice politically incorrect terrace. At 2.48pm the Trust's heroic quartet of walkers appeared and marched triumphantly to the centre circle to complete their marathon fund-raising jaunt amid a thoroughly deserved ovation. One or two were clearly moving a little gingerly, possibly savouring the first onset of a tasty set of blisters. Orient promptly nicked the bar as we showed, not for the first time, a vulnerability against their long throw-in merchant. But that was forgotten on six minutes when erratic ref Scott Mathieson spotted a handball and pointed to the spot in front of the jubilant travelling throng. Leon Con, now he does NOT miss. Up he strode – and keeper Glenn Morris guessed right by going left. Next please! The excuse had to be it was our unlucky 13th pen of the season – and we have now blown eight at a cost of NINE points! It's the unfunniest joke ever. Orient centre-back Jon Mackie smacked a low cross against his own bar. A curling Mark Gower free-kick clipped the angle. Then up popped Lawrie Dudfield to make his one significant contribution of the game, nodding in Leon Con's neat little cross deep into first-half injury-time. One-up. Let the celebrations begin. We were looking quite comfortable. But then the Drewe factor kicked in. Up to 67 minutes he had been all effort – plus all arms and fouls. He got his final warning from Oberfuhrer Mathieson and that was definitely the moment to have subbed him. Instead, within a minute, Jamie Stuart tried to be clever and conceded a corner instead of a throw-in and the resultant kick was nodded firmly in from two yards by.....Drewe via Wayne Purser. That was the moment 1,250 hearts sank and you just knew what was coming next. On 80 minutes a hobbling Darryl was left groping when umpteen failed efforts to clear resulted in Tes opting to show he also knew where the wrong net was with a pinpoint header. With four own-goals for the Os in the last three seasons, we might as well start turning out in red shirts every time we visit. Morris pulled off a superb save to deny Mark Warren and Leon Cort saw a header kicked off the line before the final whistle sounded. We then dragged ourselves away to hear every other side in the bottom seven had at least a draw to shout about. Gutting. Oh, and if you were one of those who opted to keep the ball during the second half, grow up instead of letting SUFC down!

BURY 1 SOUTHEND 1 (24/2/04): How? How did we throw..... Yes, a familiar story. All hail to the 81 United faithful who made it to Gigg Lane on a bitter night, 28 via the SUSCT substitute coach (the original's fan packed up at South Mimms), and saw two more points disappear down a big black hole in the fourth minute of injury-time. Do we have to keep it quite so interesting down the bottom? We went route one for our 27th-minute goal, Leon Con racking up his 16th of the season as he toe-poked Danny Swailes' poor back-header from Darryl's hoof past their keeper before stroking the ball into the vacant onion bag. Four minutes later Duncan Jupp, back in action, went in a bit too enthusiastically to concede a penalty. Fortunately, Darryl opted to dive left and pulled off a fine save to deny Gareth Seddon. Could we hang on? I lost count of the times I exhorted 'Come on, Blues' whilst watching Celta Vigo v Arsenal on the box. Obviously, not enough. On 94 minutes the Shakers slung a low, bendy, hit-and-hope cross from the right into our six-yard zone and Seddon got the vital touch to the delight of those home fans left in a pitiful crowd of 1,670. B*****s! When the final score at last came through on Teletext, my foot almost went through the TV screen. So what those present were feeling I

dread to think. Chris Berry was in enough pain, anyway, having strained his ankle ligaments falling off a three-inch step. He needed an A & E check, but, needless to say, not until he got back from the match. What a hero!

SOUTHEND 1 MACCLESFIELD 0 (28/2/04): I won't beat about the bush. The first 65 minutes of this game were the most abysmal I can remember in more than 40 years of Blues watching. Yes, even worse than that 0-0 at the Hall against Barnsley back in '64. One Leon Constantine overhead kick apart, neither side looked as if they had a clue and any Blackpool spy would have been rubbing his hands with glee. Macclesfield, in vivid orange, were dire and we had no problem dropping to their level. But once Jamie Stuart was relieved of his burden and Mark Bentley began to give us a bit more forward forage from midfield, things started to look up a bit. Leon Con had a header cleared off the line and then, when he hit a post from five yards seven minutes from time from a sweet Mark Gower cross, Lawrie Dudfield popped up to slot in the rebound. The cheers were purely of gratitude rather than any salute of quality. But the points were all that counted – and we got them with double number three to hit 19th again.

BOSTON 0 SOUTHEND 2 (3/3/04): The perfect riposte to the shocker we turned in against the Pilgrims at the Hall back in October. The jibes were flowing thick and fast before kick-off from the cast of SunSport know-nothings, not least concerning the fact I might be missing some special offers in the Matalan next door to York Street. But they were all rendered mute by 9.40pm, as it appeared we had netted three monster points with a show of calm authority. It was very encouraging to see Mark Bentley get his first league goal for United, with Neil Jenkins coming on in the second half to add our second. Hardly the greatest of starts for Steve Evans, somehow allowed by the powers that be to resume as the Pilgrims' manager after his 'misdemeanours'. But another big feather in the caps of Tilly and Paul Brush, with a fine 200-plus of the faithful in attendance. The Racing Post's Ian Coyne told his followers to lump on us at 9-4 – a man who, unlike one tipster in particular I could mention, clearly knows his stuff.

BRISTOL R 1 SOUTHEND 1 (6/3/04): Never found out this result until the 8th, as I was lapping up three days of gourmet food, fine wine and glorious golf at the Chateau des Vigiers in the Dordogne region of France. The heart, of course, was naturally at the Memorial Stadium and the nerves were jangling until I finally saw that a Mark Gower strike nine minutes from time had earned us yet another vital point. Not all the other results went our way again, but those of Macclesfield and Carlisle definitely did. And if we had not let those points slip so late at Gigg Lane, we would now be a stratospheric 13th instead of 18th. It looks like four wins from our final 11 games should do us, though, unfortunately, I don't see too many walkovers amongst them. A no-show in youngster Tom Dixon. Tut-tut.

I was so annoyed when Colin Calderwood of Northampton won the February Manager of the Month award for the Third Division that I e-mailed the Football League. What about Tilly? Calderwood's league record for the period was W5 L1, while Tilly's was W3 D1 L1. But, remember, we also saw off our third Second Division victim over two legs to reach LDV nirvana. What more could he have done? Patricia Brown in Customer Services replied: "The panel responsible for selecting the Manager of the Month have all the relevant information to hand. I will, however, ensure your views are passed on to them. Thank you for contacting The Football League." I reckon they forgot the LDV. A bit like ReadABet, who pull together all the online betting information. They have the LDV Vans final as the last item on their non-league section! As for the future, the rumour is Atkins is still in the frame once the season ends. And guess what? Pressure of space means my tale about him is again held over to next month.

The 'famous fans' section in the Cambridge programme featured a gent called Dominic Holland. I have to admit he is so famous I have never heard of him. But it did say comedian. So if that means contemporary, it probably explains my ignorance.

LAWRIE Dudfield's name seems to have caused the Southend Times a few problems. They had a front page picture of our goal against Cambridge scored by Gary Duffield. Inside, they had one story referring correctly to Lawrie D, another incorrectly to Laurie D. Still, no need to worry now he has departed.

Some of Drewe's problems have perhaps been explained away in revelations from Mark Gower. In his Echo 'column', Mark reveals that DB has a penchant for sporting circulation socks and likes to train wearing a heavy parachute jacket. Such eccentricities have not been uncommon in Blues performers down the years. And, not to be outdone, it seems James Corbett enjoys a spot of bingo with mum every Sunday. Clickety-click.....

Nice to see those in high places continue to pore over someone's copy of the newsletter. No sooner did I mention that the Frank Walton Stand clock was four minutes fast than a whole new clock face appeared for the Cambridge game and the hands were set to perfection.

Copped sight of another blast from the past the other day – Jason Lee popping one in for Falkirk in a 2-1 Bell's Scottish League Division One triumph over Inverness Caledonian Thistle. Looks like he is going down the same trail as Richard Cadette. As for Carl Hutchings, oh dear. The man who for some reason known only to himself decided he would be better off at Orient rather than the Hall, has just been axed by Conference also-rans Farnborough Town for 'disciplinary reasons'.

Can there be a more pathetic figure than an adult who tries to get into the ground on a concession ticket? United are absolutely right to be cracking down on this and if you know someone who is trying it on then shop' em.

THE home game v Hull, due to be played on March 20, has been rearranged for Tuesday, April 20. Meanwhile the Yeovil clash on Saturday the 24th has been designated a Family Bonanza Day by the club and the Trust is likely to take up the offer of a special match sponsorship. More details next month.

We have Trust members in all walks of life. And, as luck would have it, we have one involved with one of the nation's biggest bookies. So many thanks to James Welham for getting in touch re 'wonder horse' Southend United, as discussed in Number 55. I say wonder horse, though James informs me the only people who failed to get rich on him were his owner and trainer, John Upson from Northampton, and anyone who backed him. In 18 starts over hurdles and fences between November 1990 and May 1993, 'United' crossed the finishing line first just once. Did he go to stud? I doubt it, as we are not exactly talking Rock of Gibraltar here. More likely he made a delicious tin of Whiskas.

Mark Gower's latest £50 to charity for his January Player of the Month award is going once more to Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital. Terry Jeffreys has already despatched the cheque.

Looks like I ruffled a few SUFC feathers with my suggestion in Number 54 that we invite FLPTV to 'sling their hook' to enable the club to start their own website again, instead of being tied to the current set-up whereby you can only gain access once you have given your life history. So that's good news. We may get a few quid out of the current arrangement, but United really could do so much better for their supporters. Terry Jeffreys wrote to Geoffrey King on the matter and GK's reply was that United's hands were tied by the current deal. My response would be to untie them once the deal ends. Meanwhile, the spam just keeps on spewing forth.

WHITHER the divine Miss Vine? She is supposedly doing a runner to take a 'career break'. Not quite sure what that means. Six months off to put your feet up in the mornings and watch 'Trisha'? Still, the club say she has done a good boardroom job on the finance side – we bloomin' well hope she has – so fair enough. Correct me if I am wrong but I don't think I ever saw her in the Shrimpers pre-match. In fact, who would have recognised her had she been? Her departure has had one or two people suspecting nefarious goings-on. We'll see. Paul FitzGerald has had some more fence-sitting communications from board members concerning one of the Trust clan joining their number. Do they not know that 34 clubs now have such fan representation and it is big-time flavour of the month? We'll return to this.

Right, that's yer lot once again. And, believe it or not, I've cut a load of stuff. For comeback or comment, contact me on nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk

NR (9/3)

PS Have a hell of a day on the 21st and let's roar the lads on to a glorious victory. Come on you Blues!!!!