

SUSCT NEWSLETTER 58

IT all seemed to be going so well. Good news, for once, whichever way we looked. But we should have learned by now. Nothing ever runs totally smoothly in the wacky world of SUFC and its motley legion of ultra-loyal followers.

Tilly and Paul Brush finally being handed the long-term deals they certainly merit, after transforming the side since November, was welcome news. They know there are weak spots to work on, while we also need to try to keep other players who might be tempted elsewhere. But at least the feeling exists that next season, all things being equal, we can make a concerted assault on the play-offs if not better. Our managerial duo have earned their chance. All we want now is to see them make a real success of it.

The key to those new contracts was that, glory be, we guaranteed our Third Division place for 2004-05. Certainly not without a few scares along the way, but at least with the odd impressive and frequently encouraging performance – once Wiggers had walked the plank – that proved the quality of player in our squad is generally too good to be battling down among the dead men. We have said a sad farewell to Carlisle and York, but it could easily have been us if decisive moves had not been made by our esteemed leader to eradicate our floundering at a sufficiently early stage of the campaign.

And, believe it or not Mr G, with the B & Q development at Fossetts Farm finally getting the go-ahead from Two Jags after weeks of ‘will he, won’t he’, we might even be in our new ground by United’s centenary year of 2006. This is the biggest boost to the football club’s survival hopes for a long, long time. So the message now has to be full steam ahead to a successful conclusion, taking everybody who counts in the town with us. Ron was clearly walking on air as he delivered his warmly received end-of-season eulogy to all from the pitch before the Torquay game. A Prescott ‘no’ vote would have been catastrophic for him, so some credit where it is due. He has taken plenty of flak, told us to trust him over the club’s future and maybe he has had it right all along. Doubters and believers alike will certainly find out in the coming months. Further Fossetts details a bit later.

PERFUME

But, of course, there had to be one small fly in the ointment. The club has announced increases in seat ticket prices for 2004-05 of, for example, 10% in the East Stand from £15 to £16.50 and 11% in the East Stand for a season ticket - £275 to £305. Now that is their prerogative. After three seasons said to have been without an increase, it would have been naïve of anyone to think prices might not go up again. There is a business to be run here in what are tough economic times for all. United say 50p of the increase will go towards funding of the Centre of Excellence – more on that to come – a most laudable project. But what the Trust had a major problem with was United’s implication in the explanatory letter to season ticket holders that the £1.50 increase and its

make-up had the backing of the Trust – seemingly, simply because we had been ‘consulted’ by way of an informal talk-in on the CoE and its future. A ticket ‘surcharge’ to aid CoE funding was just one of numerous finance-raising ideas supposed to be being considered by both the Trust and the club. But, as far as we were aware, no final decisions had been reached. The club were reviewing options and so were we.

THE first of the two latest SUSCT committee meeting on April 19 and May 10 strayed from the usual format specifically so the focus could be the future of the CoE. Helen Giles, sporting a very alluring perfume, and Michael Markscheffel, who, as far as I could tell, was scent-free, had joined us in the executive suite at the Spread Eagle in Victoria Avenue for a presentation and discussion on the CoE and whether the Trust might have a role to play in helping to ensure its continued existence.

This followed revelations from Geoffrey King on the matter at the last liaison committee meeting, chief of those being that there is at least a £30,000 shortfall between the £138,000 grant the club receives from the FA to fund the CoE over a four-year programme and the actual running costs. The board have been examining ways to cover the shortfall and it was recognised that the Trust could be of assistance in that regard, particularly as local big business has shown no enthusiasm to help out.

Firstly, I owe Michael, nominated as the directorial liaison point with the Trust, an apology for referring to him as Mark in Number 57. I am given to understand that he does also have another name, though that can remain our little secret.

Bashers did the formal welcome, after which MM had to admit of the Centre of Excellence: “It is one of the best there is and not many people know about it at all.”

Step forward Ms G to put us in the picture, having first assured the gathering of the Trust’s finest hanging on her every word that United were not looking to us for a handout. Quite simply, the CoE is there to bring through young talent, with the hope it might throw up a potential ‘star’ or at least some players of sufficient ability to make Blues’ first team. Yet, despite the worthiness of the ideal, the FA grant is now palpably inadequate to keep it alive and kicking. The CoE has two parts within one programme. There are the Under-9s to Under-16s and then the scholarship participants up to Under-19 level. From next year the latter will alter to a modern apprenticeship set-up. Around 100 boys are involved. Some clubs – they include QPR, Torquay and Rochdale – have dumped their CoE programme, but SUFC, after much debate, want to continue with it.

The FA grant is ring-fenced from ordinary club funds so it cannot be ‘dipped into’ to cover other pressing needs. It pays for a head of youth - still Steve Tilson, I think – a part-time CoE director, a deputy director, the CoE scholars, travel, physios, kit, balls etc. But the cost of that little lot is £170,000-plus, hence we have what could be described as a ‘Mr Micawber situation’.

HG admitted that United wanted to increase admission prices by £1 with a bit on top for the CoE. Our chairman, Trevor Bashford, swiftly warned prices should not rise too steeply. But he felt that a £1 increase, to include the CoE rise, would probably be regarded as not excessive by the faithful if properly explained.

BOMBSHELL

THEN general ideas were thrown in the melting pot. Trust suggestions included getting the scholars’ parents more financially involved, seat sponsorship, a youth tournament, a celebrity match and using the receipts from a pre-season friendly (as long as we are not playing Arsenal, who it seems want £500,000 a fixture these days to let Terry Henry run riot). The club’s thinking also encompassed deeds of covenant, a small surcharge on season tickets and alterations to the pricing structures for both individuals and at certain designated games, though the latter was not a popular option with the Trust committee. MM stressed the board was doing all it could financially to help out.

Helen and Michael now said their farewells and departed with thanks for taking the time and trouble to call in and put us more clearly in the picture. The committee talk-in continued and it was felt replacing the current youth shirt sponsors with the Trust could be a fruitful option. But we would not require all the package perks of

the current benefactors, so would expect the cost to be somewhat lower than the £7,500 it is now. Whatever happened, though, we would be looking for our contribution to be recognised with some representation on the committee which oversees CoE finances. As with any potential investment of Trust funds, 'transparency' is crucial. And that was that on the matter for the time being – or so we thought.

For then came the bombshell announcement that the ticket surcharge was a done deal and the Trust had allegedly given it the seal of approval. There has since been no little rancour over the matter, particularly as it dropped the Trust right in it with a number of United supporters and, once more, hardly did credit to the club's PR credentials. As it appears to turn out, the problem may have occurred purely through a misunderstanding. But there remains a huge difference between the Trust considering something and agreeing to it – especially as the end result meant we got fan hostility for supposedly backing the price rise when this was not the case. We made this clear by letter to the United deputy chairman.

I believe, as Trevor said, fans would have swallowed a £1 rise with 50p to go to the CoE and understood it. But £1.50 adds up to £2 in most people's thinking. It may not sound much to a board member but it can do to Joe Soap trying to back his team, often with a family, week in and week out. A few supporters certainly made that clear in the Echo. I also know it would now be only £5 more for me to get a season ticket the equal of my East Greener to watch First Division football at Watford next season. Not that I would ever want that inflicted on me. Yet the saddest thing is that supporters have been unnecessarily angered again at a time when so much has been done by the club to restore both faith in them and optimism – and that should never have been the case. Some will not now be back next season, which cannot be the way forward. Deliberately or innocently, the fan base can no longer ever be taken for granted. Further developments could follow the May 12 liaison committee meeting. And this has been an issue that shows just how vital clear-cut future liaison between the club and Trust really is. Details of any happenings should be in Number 59.

MEANWHILE it seems that £4,000 which could perhaps have gone to the CoE went down the gurgler instead as a Football League fine for us not coughing up C** U's share of the Hall LDV gate receipts in time. In fairness, Shot Totty informs me the cash was apparently only about a day late arriving at Layer Road. And United are appealing against the fine.

In a prime example of how SUFC CAN get it right, Chris Berry and Paul Yeomanson have recently received a pair of adult season tickets each and a letter of thanks from Geoffrey King for their magnificent efforts on the transport front for the LDV Vans Trophy Final in Cardiff. It may sound a little, yet it means so much.

Sadly, though, there was little surprise expressed at the committee meeting when Paul FitzGerald revealed he had received a letter informing him that a board meeting on April 1 had decided not to appoint a supporter-director 'at this time'. The board feel fan links with United are still best served via the Trust's liaison committee. But the Trust was told that the club value the contacts between us and them.....

RESIGNED

With the flak from the trip to Carlisle still flying wildly, we received a letter back from the Cumbrians' safety officer in response to our complaints following the events of March 27 – especially those concerning attacks from rival fans and abysmal stewarding. Cause for concern was admitted and there was an apology for the behaviour of a 'small minority' of home supporters, some of whom had been banned. They said stewards pinpointed by us as being responsible for the worst excesses would not be used again. Coins were allegedly thrown by both sets of followers, according to CUFC, which was news to us. Our fans were supposed to have been informed they were being held back post-match. But this was not done and some of our number found themselves in an area of distinct danger. We were not happy with their overall version of what went on and it was agreed we should write back and tell them so, drawing particular attention to the lack of protection afforded to our supporters on the day at Brunton Park. At least now we don't have to go there next season!

It is committee vacancy time again. Brian Cotgrove has resigned for personal reasons and we have also lost the invaluable services of Dave Scriven. Dave has been a hard-working and high-profile committee man for some time and we wish him every success in his new venture – on the other side of the fence at SUFC! Paul

Yeomanson will be replacing Dave as our club liaison officer and also taking over the running of the Trust website. Members should already be noticing a major improvement in both the updating and content of www.shrimperstrust.co.uk Starting chiefly with pictures and details from the Player of the Year night, another occasion that has failed to beat the Number 58 deadline. Paul Napper is our new press officer.

Paul Y revealed that Trust membership currently stands at a new record of 1,120 – 932 adults and 188 SJS (following an in-depth Berry audit). Adam Pye, our 1,000th member, will be rewarded with a pack of Trust goodies. Well done to Victor Peretti, top of the members' recruitment list with nine attracted into the fold. He is still just behind our committee leader, secretary Terry Jeffreys, on 10. Contact Paul on 01702-302373 or e-mail p.yeomanson@bluevonder.co.uk concerning all membership and merchandise queries.

Current Life Members: Julian Ambrose, Paul Baker, Peter Butler, Andee Byford, Tim Clayton, Brian Colbear, Stuart Compton, Gary Crowe, Hugh Cumberland, Gregory Dearlove, Melvyn Dearlove, John Everett, Iain Findlay, Ian Harrison, Adam Hutchins, Brian Jeeves, Terry Jeffreys, Martin Leonard, Geoff Manning, Gill Manning, Matthew Marsh, Andrew Porter, Rachel Porter, Darren Posnack, Paul Richards, Brian Smith, John Walton, Matthew Weir, James Wombwell, Bryan Woodford.

Welcome to New Members since Newsletter 57: Jonathon Ford, Adam Drew, Howard Perry, Nick Laden, Bill Whitmore, Graham Tuttlebury, Hannah Warman, Dennis Franklin, June Mayes, Kirstie Orrey, Nick Robinson, Gladys Robinson, Scott Keys, Bradley Hoare, Matthew Donohue, Liam Salmon, Daniel Barrick, Jamie Pope, Matt Waite, Rebecca Keyes, Carl Parkin.

Final Membership Reminders: 1153 James Baker, 1151 Heather Bengé, 951 Martin Brooks, 818 Ted Carter, 730 Nick Clarke, 728 Simon Darby, 1146 Paul Davis, 690 Tom Dossa, 803 Pete Gibbons, 423 Kenny Goodbourn, 953 David Gracie, 963 Chris Harris, 1183 Ben Herbert, 1147 James Hierscher, 740 Rick Hill, 959 Matthew Jones, 796 Simon MacDonald, 1156 Michael McAtamney, 732 Barry Millar, 435 Steve Ovenden, 731 Kevin Pollock, 799 Lee Reynolds, 1148 Andy Ruffell, 1149 Mark Saunders, 751 Michael Shawyer, 215 Garry Smith, 1150 David Smith, 734 Mike Smith, 1113 Martin Todd, 733 Jennifer Watkin, 699 Mandy Watson, 700 Tony Watson, 1152 Michael Watts, 741 Chris Wright.

THE Fossetts Farm news has, not surprisingly, gone down well at both Roots Hall and with the Blue Army. The Green Party and KARERS are not quite so ecstatic, though. Take the Green Party's South-East Essex spokeswoman Irene Willis, who declared optimistically: "I feel very sad that we will be leaving our children a concrete jungle with no areas in which to play and enjoy the open spaces." Irene, my heart bleeds. My response to that sentimentalised guff is: Ever heard of Jones Memorial Ground or Priory Park? Hopefully, what eventually goes up on the site will be amenities, including our new ground, that will benefit both Southend itself and the local population from both a commercial and aesthetic viewpoint. With the B & Q 'OK', plans for the next Southend United stadium will be submitted within six months and will be different to those of 2000. Ron declared: "This is a massive boost for us and I feel this new complex will bring further success to Southend United. This is the continuation of four years' hard work." He believes the club can grow, there will be more internal investment and the ultimate goal is a return to the First Division – with promotion to the Second ideally required before we quit the Hall. And so say all of us. He added: "The stadium will allow us to use our property and financial skills to underpin the club's finances for the future. We've been treading water for the last four years, but that will change." Developments awaited with great interest.

DUNGEON

I think there would certainly have been a few 'quizzical looks', to put it mildly, if John Prescott had given Fossetts the thumbs-down. Especially in the light of his recent action in overturning a decision by Gateshead Council and allowing 50-year-old Susanne Pitt – alias Lily Von Frauenu – planning permission to open an S&M dungeon above a pizza shop in Swalwell, Tyneside. For £100 a session you can opt for a spot of pure torture or a good thrashing. Clearly no different to what we occasionally endure with Blues.....

The April 24 SUSCT Quiz Night went off very smoothly in the Shrimpers Club in the wake of the Yeovil setback. Alan Perry and Paul Yeomanson had the organisation down to a fine art, as usual, with 11 tables being well entertained by the posers set by quiz master Guy Rickard in his own inimitable style. As for the marking, I think awesome just about describes it. The profit on the night came to a very acceptable £500-plus, with the prize fine wine going, not for the first time, to Trust members Rob McMulland and Paul Collins, fellow season ticket holders Chris, Sheila and Dave Mallam and guests Gary and Anne Wilcox. Bringing up the rear, and consoling themselves with a large Mars Bar each, were those on the undermanned table headed by Nigel, our jovial Shrimpers Club matchday doorman.

The 10-pin bowling night at the 16-lane Kursaal went ahead on Thursday, May 6 and appears to have been heartily enjoyed by all 64 who took part. It might have been more, but for the irritating problem of no-shows. Four of the United squad turned up and subjected their talents to scrutiny from those members and bowlers present – Kevin Maher, Lawrie Dudfield, Michael Kightley and Michael Husbands. By all accounts, they proved themselves to be a credit to United. Many thanks to each of them for venturing out, Kevin for not quite as long as the rest, and doing their bit with the people who cheer them on. Lawrie was even rewarded with a bottle of ‘shampoo’ for a ‘golden pin’ strike, along with eight others. Another huge vote of thanks to Alan Perry for organising the evening once again. His enthusiasm knows no bounds, which is fortunate for us, and the profit on the night was a most welcome £311.99.

WE hope to set a date soon for our next curry night. A summer evening of crazy golf in Southend has also been mooted, along with plans for a Trust memorabilia fair to include items from the whole world of football and not just SUFC. The Trust will also be represented, as usual, at the Meet the Blues Day, which will be here again before we know it on August 1. Watch out, too, for details of a top piece of high-fashion Trust merchandise.....

Quid A Goal ended the campaign standing at a fantastic £3,541.25. Alan Perry is now going to be looking for some cash from all those who volunteered to take part. Please make sure you answer your obligation – e.g. I owe £26 – and hand over your undertaking as soon as possible. There will be no hiding place for non-payers. We plan to run this highly successful venture again next season.

The 100 Club is now up 76 participants. Naturally, we would like 100 before the start of 2004-05. To be a part of this very worthwhile venture, contact Alan Perry on 01702-476458 or alanperry4@hotmail.com

So how did we perform on the pitch through to the end of the season? Fortunately, as well as we needed to.

HUDDERSFIELD 1 SOUTHEND 0 (10/4/04): ‘One of the best teams we have seen here this season’, said Town manager Peter Jackson. ‘A team to watch for next season’, said the News of the World’s Yorkshire area match report. But while the praise was fulsome for us, the points were zero and our eight-match unbeaten league run came to an end. Apparently we dominated the second half, Mark Bentley rattled the bar with a free-kick and Darryl had only one major save to make against a side pipped at the post for automatic promotion. But on the half-hour a neat overhead effort left Darryl struggling and that proved to be that. Chris Berry branded referee Eddie Ilderton ‘absolutely useless’. But, then again, hasn’t almost every referee we have had during the campaign been the same? A disappointment but not a disaster – though our options are clearly limited when we have three left-backs on the bench. At least our Trust travellers still got to the McAlpine Stadium, despite the wanton vandalism inflicted only 36 hours earlier on the Supreme coach fleet.

SOUTHEND 3 DARLINGTON 2 (12/4/04): Easter egg-stacy for all United devotees who witnessed a stunning Blues comeback from two-down in what was a crucial ‘six-pointer’. If this game had been played last October we would have rolled over and died had the fickle finger of misfortune pointed at us as it did in the first 45 minutes. But Tilly and Paul Brush have stiffened backbones big-time and from the moment Mark Bentley rattled a corking 20-yarder into the top right corner only a minute into the second period the scene had been set for Operation Quaker Breaker. After presenting Paul Yeomanson with his personalised Beaver mouse mat from the lord of Berry Towers, who was unable to attend because of stock cars duties, it was up to the East Greens to bathe in the atmosphere of a bumper bank holiday crowd – up all of 156 on the Scunny game. That LDV dividend again. We started as we often do – plenty of early pressing but no end result. Our reward was to see a speculative Barry Conlon shot in Darlo’s first attack hit the feet of one his team-mates and sit up nicely for the pal to slot past Darryl. Back we came, a host of free-kicks went to waste and then, suddenly, we were two-down. A rather reckless Mark Warren lunge at Bazza, slightly more useful nowadays than in his dire spell with us, had the referee pointing to the spot. 0-2. Two Darlo shots, two goals. Mark B warmed their keeper’s hands with a 25-yard free-kick warning blast, the Blue Belles warmed Mr I’s cockles by dusting off the coloured plastic again and we resumed praying for the best. The Bentley struck with the power of a Ferrari, confidence soared and Darlo boss Dave Hodgson was a picture of apoplexy on the touchline as his team were sliced open. They were even desperate enough to dump Drewe on the seat of his pants in the area and up stepped Leon Con to strike in our seventh successful spot-kick of the season – just! Then, with five minutes to go, Mark Gower picked up a

Drewe pass down the left, skipped by a defender and lashed a tremendous left-foot drive up into the far net support. The standing ovation on the final whistle was long and deserved – and the Darlo fan who paid £127 in an auction to be the match summariser on BBC Radio Cleveland must have been ecstatic. Or perhaps not.

NORTHAMPTON 2 SOUTHEND 2 (17/4/04): The clash of the Titans. OK, two of the top three in the Third Division over their last nine games. The Cobblers were top, we were third, with Boston somehow in between. SUSCT travel for some was by luxury coach, for the rest by a Supreme bus seconded off the school run. Thank-you kind vandals. We could have lost 10-0 and it would still have been better than the video – the lamentable Rocky IV. Now I am not a violent person, but even I wanted to give Sylvester Stallone a good smack for his Punch and Judy-style portrayal of boxing, which seemed to imply that taking about 200 shots to the cranium from a clichéd Soviet automaton was more likely to turn you into a saint than a brain-damaged vegetable. This was my first visit to Sixfields and my 82nd league ground both old and new. It is excellently sited on a sprawling industrial estate that seems to be populated mostly by fast food outlets, the majority of which were soon being sampled by Trust travellers. Certainly looking at the size of some of the gargantuan Cobblers fans in Burger King, there is one clear downside to the venue – the temptation to wallow pre-match in a pool of saturated fat. The ground itself is modern and functional but a tad small with a capacity of only around 7,500. The Blue Army was housed in the away end behind one goal and around 850 of us packed in for what promised to be a tough test in breezy conditions – especially after we lost Mark Warren to an ankle injury in the kickabout! Matt ‘Mr Trendy Trainers’ Messiah did not make a very favourable impression as ref on a rare day out from the Premiership, though there was no arguing with his penalty verdict after Tes was chopped down on 16 minutes. Enter Leon Con to put away, again not exactly convincingly, our eighth successful league spot-kick out of a mere 16 awarded to us this season. Incredible. There was plenty of abuse flying when M&M pointed to the spot in our own area just seven minutes later, though there seemed little doubt that Nicky Nicolau opted for a push after not one but two below-par bits of defending. The Cobblers cracked again right on half-time with a lovely finish by one of their defenders after sterling work by Leon Con down the right. Their No 9 missing an open goal two minutes into the second half seemed to galvanise us. Throwing Mark Gower vaguely down the middle where the injured Tes should have been was not a wild success but in the next half-hour we had more than one good chance to extend our lead. It was just a shame we forgot about trying to play down the left as well as the right. We failed to cash in, Kevin Maher got himself back on the yellow card trail and from the resultant 82nd-minute free-kick we allowed dumped Cambridge boss John Taylor a free header to make it 2-2. Before the game we might have settled for that, after it.....we probably still would have.

SOUTHEND 2 HULL 2 (20/4/04): Anyone who missed this to stay in the warm and watch The Tinkerman’s losers on the box had to be short of the full shilling. As Hall encounters go, this was as good a game between two evenly matched sides as I can remember in a fair old while. Worrying pre-match rumours abounded that about half our side were being watched or bid for, with Mr Blobby Barry Fry supposedly warming up for his spying mission on Kevin Maher with a mega cod and chips from The Fish House in West Road. Surely our skipper is too intelligent to take the Fry shilling. Posh are no-hopers – we are on the up. As we showed by entertaining Spud’s Tigers, desperate for the win they hoped might clinch promotion, to some sizzling play at times. Mark Gower, excellent once more, put us ahead with a neat left-foot finish only for us to give away our hard-earned advantage needlessly soon after. Duncan Jupp conceded a silly foul and from the free-kick Darryl sadly froze on his line again to let one of their centre-backs take advantage with a help-yourself, unchallenged five-yard header. At least Darryl had partly redeemed himself earlier with a fine full-length stop from City’s £100,000 dangerman Ben Burgess. We would probably have been happy with 1-1 at half-time. But Kevin Maher had other ideas and surprised us all, probably even himself, with his bending left-footer from the edge of the box from the last meaningful kick of the opening 45 minutes. The second half saw Lewis Hunt, twice, and Gower force cracking saves from Hull’s American-born keeper Boaz Myhill. Unfortunately, the one goal went to them. Ian Ashbee was left in an ocean of space outside the area from a cleared corner and smashed in a thunderous 22-yarder that Darryl probably never saw let alone had a chance to keep out as it hurtled into his top left corner to send City’s 1,200 followers demented. We kept pressing without ever quite finding the final telling ball, while they looked hyper-menacing on the break. Overall, though, super stuff, with a quality Hull line-up pulling a fine 90 minutes out of a Blues side performing on the night to a level no one would have believed possible in the darkest days pre-Christmas. Final thought: Jamie Stuart certainly looks a better centre-back than left-back.

SOUTHEND 0 COVIL 2 (24/4/04): Well, we didn’t want to get too carried away, did we, and this was probably a welcome wake-up call. Tilly ending his programme notes with the sad old Rob Newman ‘keep smiling’ message

hardly inspired confidence. Suspended Mark Gower's man-beating capabilities and general skill down the flanks have probably never been more missed and, despite much huffing and puffing, we hardly prised out a worthwhile opportunity all match. We were safe and the feet came off the pedals. Yeovil's Dani Rodrigues, fresh from his blinding overhead strike a week earlier, popped away two very smartly taken first-half opportunities and after that there never seemed any realistic chance of another Darlo. The visitors' threat second half was all but non-existent – then again, by then the points were in the bag. One particularly worrying aspect of late has been the way we have been getting caught short on the break, particularly out wide. I know it is unwise, nay foolish, to compare us with Arsenal. But the way Patrick Vieira, Robert Pires and Co get box to box in either attack or defence should definitely be studied by our midfielders, whose progress tends to be more leisurely stroll than all-out sprint. If you saw the goals on the telly, Kevin Feasey apologises for the shaky camera work for the opener. He only got 10 minutes' notice to head for the West Stand gantry as his film was required after the regular cinematographer forgot his power lead! Ladies Day brought a new female presence to various areas of the ground, which is never a bad thing. Our current oldest member, 86 years young but with an amazing spring in her step, was given a much appreciated pre-match welcome in the Shrimpers Club plus a couple of little Trust gifts. Her only regret was that she never got the opportunity to leap up and salute a United goal, as she did on her last visit to the Hall – when we beat Bolton 5-2 back in September 1996! After two defeats from two outings, I also think the Trust's LDV Vans final shirt may have to stay in my wardrobe from now on.

ROCHDALE I SOUTHEND 1 (1/5/04): Ref Phil Prosser found his surname had been subjected to a key tweak by the end of the 90 minutes as he joined the lengthy list of officials inflicted on us this season in dire need of a government grant for a white stick. Clearly unhappy that he had decided to give Leon Constantine the benefit of the 48th-minute doubt that a speculative 25-yarder had crept over the line via their keeper's fumble before being batted back into play, he evened the score in unbelievable fashion. When an attempted low cross in the Blues area 11 minutes later hit Nicky Nicolau on what looked the right knee, the last thing anyone expected – Dale or Blues fan – was to see *osser pointing to the spot. Their taker Gary Jones was clearly still so stunned he needed the rebound from which to score after a great initial stop from Darryl. Dale celebrated as if the goal had won them the league rather than been sufficient to ensure their Third Division survival. We were left sick at seeing a couple more takeable points pinched off us.

SOUTHEND I TORQUAY 2 (8/5/04): I e-mailed Sky Sport's Helen Chamberlain to ask her if she would fancy doing the honours for the Trust's end-of-season draw at half-time. Sadly, I never got a response. Possibly, as it turned out, because she was planning a filmed ego trip at the match. There were more cameras on her than the action. Pass the sick bucket. But there were three other star names willing to take her place – messrs Berry, Craven and Yeomanson, who did the honours with a celebrity all of their own. But now for the really scary bit. Last season, the £500 first prize went to Trust member Helen Allen, whose father Ron sits next to me in the East Greens. This season the £500 first prize went to ticket number 12185. It belonged to Paul Mephram, whose dad Frank was.....sitting next to me in the East Greens! Why? Because Ron could not get Helen her normal ticket next to him, so had bought two together in the row in front and let Frank sit in his usual seat. Spooky! The cash will be going to Frank's two-year-old nephew, Taylor. Equally shudder-inducing was Blues' performance in the first 15 minutes. Torquay could surely not have believed their luck in coming up against such inept defending in a game they had to win to have a chance of guaranteeing themselves promotion. The first goal is becoming horribly familiar – corner, Darryl stays transfixed on his line, oppo player strikes from four yards. Then Lewis Hunt missed a 50-50 tackle on the byline to help set up a simple six-yard header. Trying to recover from two-down at home has fast become a habit we must kick – quick. On 17 minutes their custodian spilled a Tes drive and Lawrie Dudfield was on hand to pop in the rebound. And how numbskull ref Tony Leake failed to give us a penalty when LD was hacked down 15 minutes later no one in the best-of-campaign 8,894 crowd (about 1,800 Gulls) could possibly have known. The second half saw us have an 'equaliser' dubiously ruled out for offside, Mark Bentley hobble off – at least with the consolation of being the SUSCT Player of the Month for April – and another penalty appeal waved away when sub Drewe's drive looked to hit an arm. But again we could not make our pressure tell. We had Drewe, Tes, Leon Con and Lawrie D up front by the finish – lacking only any pace or guile. The final whistle sounded, the Gulls were up and while they and their followers partied we applauded our boys round the pitch and dreamed of our own party next May.

The match was another family fun day. The Cheeky Girls topped the bill and, damn it, I missed them. Matthew Marsh did not, though, and reported: "They were absolute c**p and looked anorexic." There's a job for Matt on NME, I'd say. A little girl sat two seats down from me had clearly come just to squeal at the Romanian

comedians. She read a book for the entire first 45 minutes and never reappeared with her dad for the second half. I did see tenor John Innes and he, as always, was excellent. He is also aided by having some talent. The United Player of the Season awards were announced with Leon Constantine third, Kevin Maher second and Mark Gower a fully deserving winner. It was utterly bizarre, though, how he limped out to collect his trophy following his recent surgery and then Carl Pettefer hobbled on with his crutches at half-time to sign his new contract. Almost as bizarre as some paras replacing the Blue Belles as the players' tunnel exit 'guard of honour'. Tilly and Paul Brush also took a salute, but rightly refused to look too triumphalist for the snappers.

Thanks, as ever, to all those who took the trouble to sell their end-of-season draw tickets. Alan Perry was a monumental figurehead once more with Terry Jeffreys king of co-ordination and we have put about another £1,500 into Trust funds.

The lucky winners were: 1. Phil Mephram (Billericay) ticket 12185 - £500; 2. Mick Butler (Westcliff member) 11366 - £250; 3. Gareth Tandy (Oxfordshire, Richard Coxell's cousin) 6731 - £100. Bottles of wine went to K A Robinson (Southend), Grant Davidson (Southend member), Mark Edwards (Shoebury), Melanie Thompson (Basildon), Vicky and Brian (North Shoebury), Doug Ridgwell (Southend) and J Orford (London).

Please let Terry J (01268-523974 or terry.jeffreys@btinternet.com) know if you are having any problems with newsletter receipt or you would like to have it sent to you by e-mail. The benefits of the latter were clear over Easter. Number 57, completed on April 6, went to 400 or so over the wire on April 7. But it was not printed and posted until April 8, the bank holiday period intervened, and the joys of second-class post meant many members did not receive it until Tuesday, April 14. Apart from revealing what a totally c**p service the Post Office now offers, it may also have had some people mistakenly wondering why there was no mention of the Huddersfield and Darlo games when there was never going to be any. A special vote of thanks here to my fellow packer Richard Coxell and to Paul, Jon-Paul and Sophie FitzGerald and Joe Elliott who stamped and labelled around 850 envelopes for a) the newsletter plus end-of-season draw tickets brigade and b) the e-mail draw tickets only gang. For anyone wondering, Richard's DIY kitchen is coming on a treat.

NICE to see Tim Hynson in the Shrimpers Bar before the Yeovil match. Tim, over for his first game from Australia, got involved in supporting Southend when the game he was playing on his Commodore more than five years ago randomly assigned Southend to him. He has been hooked ever since, even visiting the Hall during a close-season tour last year. This time he was on his honeymoon! That means he should really have been skint, yet he still came up with a £20 donation. All the best for the future to you and your bride, Tim.

United have been advertising for a Club Shop / Ticket Office supervisor. I hope that means Marisa has been moved up the SUFC ladder. I have always found the operation in there efficient, helpful and friendly when she has been running the show.

CROCKED

Some more bad news for Sir Stanley. A lay-by popular with 'dogging' enthusiasts near Maidstone has been closed off. The upside of this is it gives him more time to concentrate on other matters – like just being charged with 'trying to kill his estranged wife'.

Onandi Lowe was renowned for his nose for goal while he was with Rushden & Diamonds. But now questions are being asked over whether that was all he had a nose for after £250,000 worth of Colombian marching powder was allegedly found in the boot of his car. 'Allo, 'allo, 'allo!

It was like Emergency Ward Ten in the Blues physio room as the season wound down, with Carl Pettefer the latest to be crocked for the season with a broken fibula. Carl, like Mark Bentley, had been playing better and better as he picked up the pace of the league and in the end probably merited his contract offer. Duncan Jupp is staying for two more years as well, though there must be some doubt about us keeping hold of Nicky Nicolau. Mark Gower has had his knee operation and if he comes back a better player than he is already then we should really have something special on our hands for 2004-05. A class act. At the other end of the scale, we have said 'farewell' to Embo a year before his contract was due to expire. A Wiggers signing, I think it would be fair to

say that when he was between the sticks most Blues followers' blood pressure levels soared to new heights every time the ball went near our box. I am sure someone will snap him up – with any luck, in the Third Division.

One of United's pre-season ventures is a three-team tournament against Real Madrid and Chelsea. No, hang about. Sorry, that should have read Leyton Orient and Dagenham.

CALLING any Blues fans oop north. Mike Woods is trying to put together a Lancashire-based supporters section, which will incorporate the Manchester area. That would have been very handy during the nine years I spent working there. Anyone interested, or who knows anyone who would be interested, Mike can be contacted on 07814-500494 or on southendmick@aol.com

Excellent to see Paul Napper and Lee Morgan pictured in the FSF magazine during their recent attendance at the parliamentary reception for the FSF's 'Time For A Say' campaign.

I have been asked by our travel supremos to castigate Tony Leveritt. A text message he sent, in the light of the damage inflicted on the Supreme charabancs, did not read very cleverly. So, Tony, consider yourself castigated and no repeats, please.

Hope you all saw Barry Harris running the London Marathon sporting a Trust LDV Vans commemorative shirt. He crossed the line with kids TV presenter Floella Benjamin. I am not sure who was more honoured.

Sepp 'Mad As A' Blatter has had another of his barmy brainwaves – scrap all draws. This bloated imbecile, who runs FIFA like his own personal fiefdom, reckons all games level after 90 minutes should have a penalty shoot-out to decide them. I am sure I would have been delighted after all the effort that went into, say, our recent quality 2-2s v Northampton and Hull to have seen it all go to waste in a Micky Mouse finale that appeals only to the brain-dead Yanks. I shall be contacting the FA to tell them to start work now on getting the Swiss cretin eased off his gravity train as quickly as possible.

DEAD

Ernie Tippett. Now there is a name to conjure with. But, believe it or not, the ex-Wimbledon coach is the new boss of Rushden & Diamonds. And who has he brought swiftly on to his coaching staff but another ex-Wimbledon employee – none other than our old 'friend' Stewart Robson. Plus some bloke called John Bolle.

NEEDLESS to say, we had no representatives in the Third Division team at the PFA Player of the Year awards. But as the voting is still done pre-Christmas I suppose it was no surprise. I must admit I would have had Efe Sodje and Scunthorpe full-back Nathan Stanton in my team – not!

Warning! A Jobson Jnr has allegedly stated he would not mind getting involved at the Hall. Over our dead bodies, I should think.

OK, that's it. Any comment, comeback, praise, vile slurs etc, address them to: nigel.rickard@the-sun.co.uk

NR (12/3)

PS1. Time for that divi-up of the LDV Vans travel income, please. Our few thou would be better off in our deposit account than on a balance sheet.

2. When is this season's Q&A? Or is it now last season's?

3. Leeds United – welcome to the real world.

4. Coming in Number 59 – SUSCT Player of the Year night review, no punches pulled squad analysis, facts and figures, the Atkins story (there should definitely be room this time), some FSF news, how peeing against the goalposts might save us a few points and a bit of other stuff.