

## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

### THE INTRODUCTION – Paul FitzGerald

**Ok....since our last Newsletter and the Hull game, we have seen our season virtually fall apart – and yet suddenly, is it possible we have rescued it? As is so often when supporting a team like ours, fortunes ebb and flow like the tide. Current excitement is around the new blood brought in from Norwich. Can the youngsters really help turn this around and create a worthwhile and successful run in? We are certainly dreaming of it! Time will tell of course, but the home debut of Master Loza was nigh on the best you could wish to see and had comparisons with several greats from the past....not much to live up to then....Good luck young man!**

I reported last time on the planned walk to Dagenham and I am pleased to confirm that we made it safely....raising in excess of 4K, of which 50% will be going to the Stroke Unit. I say "will" because sadly a couple of promised donations from none other than the Team Management and Squad appear to have got glued into wallets and need some prising out. What a good job that same thing does not occur when fans pay their season ticket money or travel to games.

Which leads me nicely into....confirmation that Season ticket prices are held again is surely good news - although I am assured that should we get promoted, they will be put up. SO, as ever, the advice is get in early....for us hardened and worn supporters it is probably a no brainer subject to finances and I will be opening my wallet subject to satisfactory resolution to the point above.



Many of you will know Michael Markscheffel – he has been a SUFC director for many years and a long term supporter of the Trust. He has agreed to cycle to Amsterdam in support of the FA's commitment to Prostate Cancer. Michael was not first choice, it really should have been Steve Kavanagh but the FA in their wisdom double booked and Steve is elsewhere. Steve lost his father to Prostate Cancer and is quite upset not to be able to take part – but Michael, his son and some colleagues have stepped in. I'd personally like to wish Michael and his team every success with the trip and the fundraising – I'm sure we all know someone who has been affected by this dreadful disease and it would be great if Trust members could support Michael and his team. You can do this at <https://www.justgiving.com/Michael-MarkscheffelSUFC> or if you prefer, by leaving a donation with us in the Shrimpers Bar on match days.

During the last month, we produced an Electronic survey (apologies for the problem with one question – these volunteers...I have docked their pay) which included some requested feedback from the club. We were delighted with the response and comments received and have passed the relevant info on Tickets to Steve Kavanagh. Steve, as usual, has taken the trouble to respond and we agreed that his response should be circulated to all members. If you responded, thanks so much it really is good to get feedback and this will hopefully help us improve our service to our members. Steve's response can be found later in this newsletter and the response to the Trust section of the survey will be published in our next newsletter.

The Trust committee is always looking for new blood – so if you would like to get involved in any of our activities at any level, please don't hesitate to contact us.

**As ever, you can contact me at [pfitz666@aol.com](mailto:pfitz666@aol.com) if you'd like to comment on anything the Trust does or does not do.**

On a very personal note I'd like to wish long time Trust supporter Howard Studd all the best in his current fight against illness.

## SHRIMPERS TRUST PLAYER OF THE YEAR AWARDS

**The Trust's Player of the Year Awards and Season review will be held on Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> April 2014 at 7.30pm in the Shrimpers Bar, Roots Hall.**

This Season the Annual Shrimpers Trust POTY Awards will also include, the Junior Blues Player of the Year, the Martin Cranmer Goal of the Season and the Shrimpers Trust Youth Team Player of the Year with the winner receiving the Tom Grace Memorial Shield.

During the evening there will be a short review of the Season put together by Scott Wallace from SX Sports Media Film Production, which will also include the top 3 in the Goal of the Season Award.



**Further details including details on how to vote for your POTY and Goal of the Season have been included with this Newsletter.**

## SHRIMPERS TRUST SURVEY – STEVE KAVANAGH RESPONSE



**The Shrimpers Trust very kindly recently did a survey and has shared the responses with the Club.**

The survey was answered by some 122 people of whom nearly 65% were season card holders.

The questions not only asked for a yes or no response but also asked for comments to back up the answers and to provide some depth to the reasoning behind people's feelings.

The responses are in general what I would have expected but I thought it right to reply to some of the points raised.

**Do you feel that Southend United season tickets represent value for money? Yes 71%**

Within the responses to this question a few general themes came through as follows:

*Yes but devalued by offers such as £5 games.*

In season 2013/14 we had one £5 game and it is the intention to potentially do so again next season, the maximum is 2 but most likely one at most. I think it is right that people are clear that this may happen when buying their season cards so they can make the financial decision. In my opinion having such a game is an opportunity for the whole of the Community to get behind the Club and for the Club to get back in touch with, and hopefully increase, the fan base.

It is only by increasing the supporter base on a match day that in the longer term we can look to bring down season card prices.

It is a fine balancing act but for the York £5 game over 9,000 Southend fans attended and a large number of these have continued to come to games paying full price, even though their purchasing record before the game was poor.

The level of people buying tickets for games has risen notably since this match. The vast majority of season card holders I have spoken to positively got behind this initiative as they appreciate that being a season card holder at a full Roots Hall adds to their match day experience and understand in difficult financial times our need to get as many people attending games as possible.

Finally the percentage saving on a season card, even with a £5 game factored in is still substantially in the season card holder's favour before all the other benefits are considered e.g. Cup game savings.

# NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

*The Club should offer Cup games included in the price of the season card.*

This is a common request I have heard many times, at a previous Club I worked for as well, but it is potentially very expensive for a Club. Every cup game, and indeed most friendlies, are shared gate games. This means each Club gets 45% of the net profit and the FA or relevant authority get a share too. So if for example we have 3,000 season cards and the ticket price was £10 then that game would cost SUFC £16,500 for giving the cup game as part of the season card.

It doesn't guarantee a large gate as many people may feel they get it for free so won't turn up, but their seat is deemed as sold so we have to account as income £30k even though we have received £nil. What we have done in the last few years is ensure that season card holders not only get priority for their seats for a period but we have also offered discounted prices, giving back value to our most valued customers. This strategy, where possible, will continue as we aim to give the best value to season card holders.

Large Clubs such as Man Utd do do this but they price in Cup games to tickets so whilst you think you get it for free in fact you are actually buying the Cup game and we believe that it is better to give you choice and add value with cup discounts rather than price in Cup games.

*Why don't we do differential pricing around the ground?*

I have looked at this time and time again, it is very hard to justify with the way the ground is constructed or as in the case of the South Lower very difficult to steward to ensure that people can't buy cheap seats and migrate on a match day causing crowd control issues, and indeed ending up costing the Club money which ultimately means those who don't move pay for people to have the cheap seats.

When you consider each area there are positives and negatives. What we have done is to continually review this but for now have a consistent price that is easily understood. Areas such as the South Lower are used for ticket initiatives with primary schools etc. where we are looking to create long term sustainable supporters, I heard this week of a young lad who had never been to a game, came under our schools initiative and has since attended every game with his Granddad.

**Do you feel that Southend United match day tickets represent value for money? Yes 68%**

*Very few league 2 clubs charge more than £20*

This isn't true, I have the prices across the Clubs and we compare very favourable if you look at the highest prices. The issue you come back to on comparables is we are the only Club that doesn't have differential pricing and as a result if you look at the lowest prices makes us look expensive.

Most Clubs have a small area where they offer cheap seats but these are often not seated and have minimal facilities with blocked views or even open air (you would have got very wet in your cheap seat this season!!).

So when you look at this pragmatically our prices are comparably very good.

As I note in season cards above I have considered lowering South Lower prices but this also creates a problem with the pricing of away tickets. We have to price tickets in the away end at the same price as the comparable area in the home end.

In the Leagues eyes this is the South Lower. So by offering this I would be reducing our income stream from the away fans, especially for the higher attended games, for a notional saving for a few SUFC fans. Although most SUFC fans would be paying the same if not more, this is simply not equitable or sensible for the vast majority.

This is why we look to use this and the family area for the Primary schools initiative to help create atmosphere and generate our next generation of supporter.

I should also note that our actual match ticket price this season is £19, there are ample opportunities to buy online or on the telephones (not when we are selling Cup games as demand out strips our resources) in advance and we would be very happy if everyone bought in this way as we could save costs in reducing the staffing in the couple of hours before kick-off when there is a mad rush, but I also recognise fans are creatures of habit but we want to improve your experience where we can and if that means you get a cheaper ticket then great.

# NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

**How do you feel about Southend United cup ticket prices? Cheap 15% About Right 76% Expensive 9%**

*Some games where too much such as Millwall*

High profile cup games represent an opportunity for the Club to correct the substantial losses that are made. We priced the games to maximise revenue and based it on demand. The attendance at both the Hull game and the Millwall games suggest we got the balance of supply and demand about spot on, the Hull game was frustrating as Health and Safety stopped us selling more tickets in the North stand and we were surprised that a Premier League Club didn't bring more fans.

As I have noted we have built in discounts for all Cup games for season card holders to ensure you get the best value, the discounts on offer more than making up for the reduced cost of the £5 game in the League season.

**Have you taken part in a Southend United ticket incentive scheme (e.g. Friend for Fiver Kids for Quid)? Yes 31%**

This one I did find surprising as we have looked to add value to season card holders in being able to bring friends at reduced rates occasionally.

When we make such offers the take up is extremely low so I would be interested in what offers season card holders would like to see that would entice them to get their friends and family along, as everyone did for Wembley, to help grow the underlying support, raise interest in the Club and help us to commercially balance the books; that then helps us propose reductions in season card prices as the underlying income has increased and we start hitting breakeven.

**Do you like Friday night football? Yes 66%**

**Does Friday night football affect your decision about whether to buy a season ticket? No 80%**  
**How many Friday night games would you like to see in one season? Highest 3-5 26%**

This answer is very interesting as clearly this divides opinions, the vast majority of correspondence I get is negative but that is not shown in this reply.

However, having looked at the attendances, when I strip out community initiatives and away support, Friday nights are slightly down on Saturdays.

Historically they have been seen as a positive and still clearly are but I think it is a balance and that is reflected in the replies.

I do feel this season the number in a row was wrong and we won't repeat that, I think as an occasional offering for something different they work really well.

The comment has been made that it was unfair on those who bought season cards for these changes to occur after the event, I hear this and will state that we won't have more than 4 Friday night home games next season possibly less (between 3-5 games polled 26% the highest vote), excluding Good Friday and if SKY TV move a game beyond our control.

We will endeavour to spread these out but we are to an extent in the hands of the visiting Clubs who have to agree to the move.

## Overview

Firstly thanks to The Shrimpers Trust for carrying out the survey and thank you for those who took the time to respond, having supporters views is essential on these areas and others and it is something I would like repeated and perhaps some feedback on areas to consider for future surveys would be of real value so we can here peoples real views and not just those who shout the loudest.

The responses were really interesting and represented what people had told me as I walk around on a match day, please feel free to stop me or write or email me. I will answer every question I can, provide they are polite or not asking me to comment on something I clearly can't.



# NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

My responses are aimed to help give a feel for the direction we are looking to go in these areas so you have the confidence to make decisions on things such as purchasing a season card for next year but also to try to remove some misconceptions that still exist or areas where it's simply not possible such as giving cup games for free.

**I hope my replies have been useful and thank you again for your time and your support of Southend United.**

## FUNDRAISING

### 100 Club

The latest winners in the scheme, pulled out of the hat during weekly draws since the last newsletter were **John Clench, Mike Smith, Neil Whitehead, Danny Collins, Paul FitzGerald, John Walton, Jon-Paul FitzGerald, Chris Karkowski, Andrew Haddow, Mrs C. A. Harvey, Teresa Perry and Roy Rice.**

The nature of the 100 Club means the more people that sign up, then the bigger the weekly prize. To register your interest, you can still contact Alan Perry at [alanperry4@hotmail.com](mailto:alanperry4@hotmail.com) or by calling 01702 476458 and put yourself in with a chance of winning the weekly prize.

Remember, the more people that sign up to the scheme, then the higher that prize will be. By setting up a standing order for just £5 a month (or just £60 a year), you put yourself in with a chance of winning around £28.00 per week at the present time.

### Quid-a-Goal

**Our Quid a Goal scheme is now nearing its end for the 2013/14 Season.**



**So far this season the total raised after 47 games is £1,572.00, which with 5 games left of the 'regular' season is considerably up on last year's total of £1290.00.**

Once the Season has finished (*hopefully with a visit to Wembley*) Alan will write to all those that have made a pledge with the total owed to us, and all we ask is that you make your payment as soon as possible so that we can pass on the 50% share to Ben Clarkson to enable him to purchase some new physio equipment.

## GOING TO THE DOGS!!!

**The Shrimpers Trust are organising a trip to Romford Greyhound Stadium on Friday 27th June 2014.**

At a cost of just £20.00 not only will you get admission to see an evening of Greyhound Racing but you will also get a Fish & Chip Supper with a Dessert, a Free Drink (house wine, house beer or a soft drink) and your Race Card.

The price includes return Coach Travel from Roots Hall leaving at 17.30pm.

**To book your place please complete the booking form enclosed with this newsletter or alternatively you can book online by Credit/Debit Card in the Events Section of the Trust Shop at [www.shrimperstrust.co.uk](http://www.shrimperstrust.co.uk)**

**If you require any further information please contact Clare Brooks on 07980 363092 or by email at [travel@shrimperstrust.co.uk](mailto:travel@shrimperstrust.co.uk)**



# NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

## 2014 WORLD CUP PREDICTION COMPETITION

The Shrimpers Trust is once again running a World Cup Prediction competition.

The format is the same as in previous years with score predictions required for each of the group matches and then predicting the teams to reach each of the following rounds.

The competition is open to everyone and not restricted to trust members (or one entry per person) so feel free to pass this on to work colleagues, friends, family, whoever.....the more the merrier!



The entry fee is £5 per entry with half going towards the prize pool and the other half to trust funds. The prize pool is then split with 60% going to the winner, 30% to the runner up and the remaining 10% to third place. Obviously the more entries we get, the bigger the prize pool gets!

Further details including competition rules and an entry form have been enclosed with this Newsletter.

## 5p COLLECTION CARD



With this newsletter you will once again find enclosed a 5p Collection Card.

This fundraising initiative that the Trust started in July 2012 has so far raised nearly £300 toward our on-going support of the SUFC Youth Team.

All you need to do is stick your spare 5p coins on the card (sellotape or blue-tack will do) and return it to the us either to the Trust Info Stand in the Shrimpers Bar or by post to The Shrimpers Trust, PO Box 5830, Southend on Sea, Essex, SS1 9FD

## MEMBERSHIP

### Life Membership (Total 219)



Life Membership of the Trust currently costs £100.00 if you have an email account or £125.00 if you prefer to receive Trust Mailings by post.

If you are interested in joining this group please contact our Membership Secretary, Paul Yeomanson via email at [membership@shrimperstrust.co.uk](mailto:membership@shrimperstrust.co.uk).

You can also join up as a Life Member in the Membership Section of the Trust Website [www.shrimperstrust.co.uk](http://www.shrimperstrust.co.uk), and postal applications will also be accepted at **Shrimpers Trust, PO Box 5830, Southend-on-Sea, SS1 9FD**.

### Welcome to New Members since the last Newsletter

**Angie Abdirahman, Tony Allen, James Burton, Tony Gardener, Derek Leer, Stuart Rushton, Luke Squire and Vi Thorne.**

**\*\*Please note that the Shrimpers Trust would like to know if any of its members' addresses change, or if they have a new email address so that newsletters and other correspondence can be sent to the correct address. Please send any change of address details to **The Shrimpers Trust, PO Box 5830, Southend on Sea, SS1 9FD**, by email to [membership@shrimperstrust.co.uk](mailto:membership@shrimperstrust.co.uk) or alternatively fill in our on-line contact details form which can be found in the Membership Section of the Trust Website, [www.shrimperstrust.co.uk](http://www.shrimperstrust.co.uk) \*\***

## NEW MERCHANDISE

**The Trust is launching a new range of merchandise over the coming months and the first of these are two new styles of Polo Shirt.**

The first is a 'standard' cotton polo shirt manufactured by Gildan or Fruit of the Loom and will be available in navy with white embroidery or white with navy embroidery.

These polo's will feature the new Trust Logo on the left breast and the Trust's website URL on the right sleeve.

**With sizes from small to 4xl they are priced at £20.00 plus postage & packing if required.**



The second polo shirt is a 'polyester' one (similar to current football shirts), is manufactured by Joma and is available in navy with yellow trim. Again these polo's will feature the new Trust Logo on the left breast and the Trust's website URL on the right sleeve.

**This style polo is available in sizes small to 3xl and are priced at £24.00 plus postage & packing if required.**

An order form has been enclosed with this newsletter or alternatively you can purchase these online from the Trust Shop on our website at [www.shrimperstrust.co.uk](http://www.shrimperstrust.co.uk)

An initial order will be placed in around 2 weeks' time with delivery expected 2/3 weeks after order placement.

## WE WANT YOUR FOREIGN COINS

**It's nearly holiday time and when you come back do you put all your foreign currency in your man draw? Or you didn't get rid of your old British coins before they went out of circulation? Well bring them to us and we can bank them into Shrimpers Trust coffers as a donation.**



We appreciate that, in this economic climate that a lot of people will not be in the fortunate position to make monetary donations but why not give us your old foreign coins which are unused and we can put them to use.

This also applies to lower denomination of foreign bank notes, so if you're feeling generous, bring those to us too!

From the next home game we will have a bucket in the Shrimpers Bar for your foreign currency, come and see us and dispose of it. Alternatively, you can send the currency to **The Shrimpers Trust, PO Box 5830, Southend on Sea, Essex, SS1 9FD** or pass to your favourite committee member.

Thanks in advance and up the Shrimpers!

## THUNDERBIRDS ARE GO! – SUFC 1<sup>st</sup> TEAM MATCH REPORTS

**Welcome to our new Southend United 1st Team Match Report section for the 2013/14 Season.**

This season the match reports are being written by Trust Member Gary Beard, and as you read them you will realise that they are not your normal run of the mill reports, which you have probably gathered from the title.

The Trust Committee would like to thank Scott Barber for providing us with match reports in previous seasons.

**Monday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2014**  
**Southend 3 Oxford 0**



Smug mode! Utter, utter smug mode. After so many weeks of doom and gloom, with even the club's own scoreboard driven to advertising the Samaritans, a ray of bright sunshine! Whether or not it turns into a heat wave has yet to be determined but boy does it feel good to be basking in it right now!

All morning long a steady drift of people have wandered up to my desk to comment upon last night's game. Some were actually there; others caught it on the TV. But all were unanimous in their praise for the Blues. Many liked the look of our defence; a few the shape of our midfield but it was young Loza (Hamir to those that know him well) who caught everyone's eye.

With a goal, a penalty award and an assist to his name, it was small wonder that the TV crew from Sky made a beeline for him straight after the final whistle had blown. As home debuts go it wasn't bad and if no one was quite sure who he was before the game, they sure know now! But while it is fantastic to at last have a forward to drool over; it would be very wrong to ignore the contribution made to this game by his teammates. They too deserved every plaudit going for the way that they fought for every ball in order to hold a determined Oxford attack at bay.

It was a key game for both sides. A win for Oxford and a play-off position for them was almost guaranteed, defeat for us meaning that we would be down amongst the 'almost men'. However, three points for us and we would be back in the play-off positions with everything to fight for whilst Oxford themselves would find themselves drawn into the battle for a play-off position. A great script and one that the TV companies couldn't ignore; hence the reason why this game was being played upon a Monday night and not the scheduled Tuesday.

The Thunderbird eyrie was its usual rumbustious self as we awaited kick off. Uncle Albert, throat raw after gassing away to whichever of his old workmates hadn't run away fast enough, was slurping noisily away at a cup of tea; Trigger had his nose deep down inside a programme whilst Denzil delved into his orange bag of tricks to locate his mobile phone. It hadn't beeped or anything but still he wanted to check for incoming messages, just in case. Actually there was a second reason. Over the weekend he had got lost whilst strolling around a circular running track. It had taken 12 laps before he spotted the exit sign and now he was thrusting some sort of sponsorship form in front of us demanding hard cash as compensation.

Boycie, still starry eyed after having a conversation with Southend director, Gary Lockett, absent minded handed over a note. On it was written the letter 'M' and the jury are still out over whether or not that was a reference to our monarch or a property game's bank. Either way, Denzil's 'proof' of his 'sporting achievement' being only a photo of him standing next to some blond (No, it wasn't Goldilocks but the ambience was much the same) was hardly convincing evidence, and so he had to be satisfied with just the one contributor.

Brown's decision to drop Eastwood in favour of his loanee signing surprised many. It was certainly a bold gamble but, given that this was a win by any lawful means situation, he didn't really have a lot of choice. The Barney Eastwood show had hardly grabbed any headlines, so why not try out the kid instead? That his horses came home in such style though must have been a surprise, even to him.

Blues kicked off attacking the North Bank behind which around 150+ away fans were gathered. Rather a poor show chaps, your side relatively secure in the play offs and that's all you can manage! We take more to friendlies!! Accordingly it was up to Blues Voice to create an atmosphere and, with a camera positioned right beside them; they did so to good effect; as the game's result testifies!

Loza was soon capturing everybody's eye as he terrified the Oxford backline with his pace and control of the ball. His slight build though meant that he could be easily robbed and so he was on occasions, but on others he was unstoppable. In the 9<sup>th</sup> minute he put a defender under pressure and was eventually able to steal the ball away from him. To describe it as a tackle would be going it a bit strong, rather his harassed opponent, who



## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

must have felt that he was being attacked by a rabid teddy bear, lost control of the ball. But it was the opening that Loza was hoping for and he swiftly crossed the ball low into the area.

Timlin had read the situation well and so looked the most likely person to take advantage of it but the ball somehow eluded him. Fortunately though Atkinson was following in and suddenly all the roofs were coming off the ground as the ball hit the back of the net! Phew, it was a mixture of sheer relief and joy as everyone celebrated the goal. We'd almost forgotten what one looked like and now we were not only in front, but had also scored against one of our closest rivals for promotion. Come on you Blues!!

Smiles and happy faces were everywhere you looked. Uncle Albert was doing some sort of jig. If he didn't damage himself then the rest of us were in great peril. But who could grouse when our wonderful Blues had just taken the lead. This was good stuff, and we wanted more! Friday's rain and wind was all forgotten now and although dusk had fallen ages ago each one of us felt that we were standing under our own personal sunbeam, so warm was the glow of satisfaction that we had gotten from the goal.

Before another ten minutes were up we had made it two. Loza, yes him again, had chased a lost ball into the area and beaten the goal keeper to it. His neat twist to bring him head onto goal panicking the keeper into error. Result our first penalty for yonks! Em, thanks goalie, but, without our 'regular' penalty taker Corr, could we actually put it away?

Opinion was split, even within individuals. Mike for example couldn't bear to watch, so crucial would a second goal be, but equally he couldn't look away. One moment he was standing with his back to goal and shielding his eyes, the next he was peeping through his hands to check out what was happening. Actually Oxford, to their credit, had not held up proceedings by protesting but even so, watching on as Barnard placed the ball on the spot was a heart stopping moment.

The keeper, on his line, but moving about to put the penalty taker off seemed to fill his goalmouth. Surely there was no room in which to squeeze the ball past him. Lee though hadn't taken his eyes off the goalkeeper for one second. High stakes were being played out here and mind games counted nearly as much as the kick of a ball. The whistle blew and Barnard, the Blues Voice singing out his name, strode up to the ball and made no mistake in scoring his first goal for the club since returning from Southampton. The pressure cooker that was Roots Hall just exploded!

Goals, just like buses, were coming along in pairs. Our just fruits for all the effort that we had put in, not just tonight, but over the past twelve or so games. Spring was not only in the air, but also in our step; confidence flowing throughout the team. Each and every Blue shirt a picture of joy and excitement. As indeed so were we. Being two goals up inside the first half an hour was simply unbelievable. Nevertheless we were having a ball. Albert was doing a Brucie all over again, Boycie had banished Eoyore back into his field and even Denzil got into the spirit, putting down his mobile for a whole two seconds before commencing to take another selfie for Mushbook. Heady stuff indeed.

As Trigger began reciting all the other times over history that we had taken a two goal lead, the game settled itself down. Oxford were not chuffed with the score line, it had not been in their script, and they wanted to get back on track just as soon as possible. However, with Sokolik and Egan forming a castle wall in front of Bentley they lacked the munitions required to trouble us. These two guys have really stepped up to the plate and with Coker and White playing well alongside them, we now have a defence that is second to none in this league.

Timlin then went very close to scoring our third with a belter of a shot that grazed the bar and for a while it began to look like this just being a case of seeing how many we could score. But Oxford were determined to get back into the game and actually should have done so following a corner. The ball somehow eluded our two gate keepers to run free, close to the back post, where a visiting player was lurking. Fortunately though his shot was wild and it flew not only over the bar but almost over the South Bank roof as well. Did we take the micky? Just a tad!

Halftime was a very happy time. Albert disappearing off to haunt his mates again of course helped, but the two goals and our all-around play were the main plus points. From being in a position of not knowing quite from where our next goal was going to come from, we now seemed to be creating chances for fun. Oxford's manager was going to have his work cut out in trying to organise his side such that they could stem the Blue tide that was threatening to overrun them.

The first few minutes of the second period though suggested that he had, as they penned us back into our half of the field. Gradually though, as we hunted the ball down in packs, their passes became looser and looser. Accordingly before overly long we were back knocking on their woodwork. Literally!

Apparently over the weekend, whilst Denzil was turning in circles, desperate for some directions, some player in the League of Greed scored from around about the halfway line. Now I don't know if our guys were on a bet,

## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

but both Hurst and Leonard almost emulated that feat; each time being denied by an inspired goal keeper who just managed to tip each of their long range efforts over the bar. Passers-by in Victoria Avenue must have thought that Roots Hall was hosting a fireworks display so many oooooohs and aaaaaars were filling the night air. Our team was entertaining us and we were fully appreciating their efforts.

What then followed can only be described as 'Golden' football as for twenty minutes or so we laid siege to their goal. A cricket score only being denied by the brilliance of their goal keeper who put on a one man show to deny us. First Hurst, bursting by two players into the box fired powerfully from close range only to see the goalkeeper somehow block his shot. Then, from a corner, Egan's header had goal written all over it (And through the middle too) until somehow the keeper pushed it away to safety.

If we hadn't already been two goals up, then another frustrating night, just like when we played Hartlepool who must still be wondering how they survived, could have been on the cards. As it was though, Oxford regained some of their belief from their keeper's performance; reasoning that the Gods must still be smiling on them if they were still only two goals down despite their opponent's fantastic football and striking display. Accordingly they began to play a bigger part in the game and our nerves began to fray. If they got a goal back now ...

Luckily though they could only huff and puff against a team that, to a man, was determined to hold onto their two goal lead. And the trainers of both sides could certainly take pride in the fitness of their players as even in the 85<sup>th</sup> minute players were running the length of the pitch; either to provide cover or to support an attack. As an advertisement for our league it was right up there. Indeed people who had also watched the Barcelona game at the weekend said that this game had been far more interesting and exciting for the neutral supporter. They also liked the fact that 'Swan Lake' was not being re-enacted every few seconds!

Then it got even better for the uncommitted, and as for the true believers, well they were in total heaven as Loza seized upon a loose ball in the middle of the park and set off on a mazy run that eluded two full blown tackles before unleashing an unstoppable shot from the edge of the penalty area to seal his adopted sides victory. It was a simply fantastic effort and, strange to say, it was a pity that the cameras were rolling to capture it. Yeah, that did mean that it's been preserved for history, but it also meant that every single manager that we are going to encounter between now and the end of the season will have the name 'Loza' written down in their little black books.

Of course, as things stand, we've only got him for a month. But during that time we are going to be up against both Rochdale and Fleetwood. Similar results to tonight's game could see us safely into the play offs but were we to lose Loza, and the electric effect that he has upon our ability to attack, (There's plenty of big, bad bears in them there woods; few of them named Boo Boo) things could very quickly turn against us. But for now, it's sufficient to just soak in the pleasure that this result, and Blues performance, gave us. The good times are back? Well just maybe, could be. As ever it's a case of wait and see!

Come on you Blues!!

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**Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2014**  
**Southend 1 Torquay 0**



Well it's all going down to the wire! With four teams all competing for just two play-off places and possibly only one point separating them, (Plymouth didn't play today because their opponents, Chesterfield, are involved in a Wembley cup final) only one thing is for certain, and that is that things are going to change, and then change all over again!

But for now, thanks to our great defence (17 clean sheets!) our goal difference means that we are sitting on top of this particular pile. Next weekend's fixtures make interesting reading though and the game of snakes and adders, that is both fascinating and nail biting to be involved in, will no doubt have even more bite to it once the dust settles around about 16:50 next Saturday.

My job though is to inform you about the past and I certainly felt like Tony Robinson as the Thunderbird dinosaurs lumbered into view. I say view, but actually, although we certainly were aware that Albert was somewhere in the vicinity we couldn't actually see him. The clues were definitely there though and no one could ever describe them as being subtle. For one, puddles weren't exactly rippling as much as shivering; secondly his roar was booming above the general background noise so much that even the crackling public broadcast system couldn't compete.

His brother Boycie though was easily spotted. So tall, that he got included in this week's vote for the most popular tower building in London, his elevated frame swayed first this way and then that as he meandered his way to his seat. Just imagine the movements of a drunken giraffe's neck as it recovers from a golf swing and

## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

you'll be there. Thankfully though there was no sign of his primary instrument of torture, Marlene. But rising hopes were quickly dashed as Boycie, never one to let optimism get out of hand, revealed that she was on her way.

Trigger was already safely ensconced in his seat, match day programme loving being fondled, and so he only looked up briefly to frown at all the disturbance before once more submerging into his smorgasbord of facts and figures. Rodney was also too now on his way, his face all flushed after having had an encounter with one of the Blue Belles. They represent two of his greatest joys in life (Women and betting) and, unable to resist one, natural forces providing the barrier to the other, he was now the proud owner of a halftime draw ticket!

Now, with kick off fast approaching (The teams were performing the pre match ritual handshakes) only one T'Bird was absent from his perch. Denzil! Possibly his Harley Hotpoint was having problems with hills again or maybe it was just that his habit of getting lost was back in play. Then, strand of hair all messed up, he appeared. Apparently there had been, wait for it .... traffic on the road! With cries of 'Sit Darn' ringing in his ears, he obliged and the game got underway.

Blues were attacking the North Bank and started the game brightly. Torquay though had come for a point, announcing the fact by packing their box with eleven players every time the ball entered their half, and so the game soon became one of frustration. We would advance, reach the edge of their box, get bogged down, and lose the ball .... repeat ad nauseam. Oh on occasions of course, almost as often as the state opening of Rodney's wallet! our visitors did venture forward. So there was always the risk of them getting a lucky break but, with our defence looked very assured, sitting on the edge of your seat was an activity reserved solely for those suffering from piles!

Expectations, artificially raised by Monday's performance against Oxford, were never going to be met of course. But had, Loza's strike of the ball inside the first minute gone straight, rather than caused it to be punctured, an event that meant it flew well wide of its target, things might have been much different. As it was though we had to wait until nearly the 20<sup>th</sup> minute before a corner from Hurst was almost met by the outstretched foot of Sokolik at the far post. Humour as well as disappointment arose from this effort as Uncle Albert refused to be shaken from his assertions that it had been White that had gone close. Further interrogation of our confused elder eventually teasing out the fact that he couldn't actually say Sokolik's name and so had sought safety by using White's instead!

As halftime approached a neat chip by Barnard, following some good build up play by Blues almost caught Torquay out, as their goal keeper advanced of his line. But alas, for both us and the game, it just looped over the bar and into the back netting. During the break it was suggested that our play was too slow and that we needed to speed things up two or three gears. But to do so, you need space in which to operate and with 21 players, plus an extremely sleepy referee, occupying just one half, even elbow room was very much at a premium.

Torquay's manager though had come up with a cunning ploy and his team put it into operation almost straight away. The new half barely getting underway before John White was taken out by a rugby tackle. A manoeuvre conducted in such stealth that neither the linesman, two feet away, nor the referee who was also close by, observed anything awry. Everybody else did though and everybody, the West Stand especially, rose as one to complain. Then, despite the fact that the Torquay thug was still trying to separate White's head from the rest of his torso, the referee allowed the game to go on until eventually he blew up for a foul on the edge of our area.

Unbelievably, he then strolled over to chat with the linesman on the far side of the field to find out what had got the home crowd so excited. Had he but walked instead just three yards due west then Mike would have told him all that he needed to know; using very short words! Eventually the blind, deaf and dumb official decided to book our player for giving away the free kick and then also the Torquay player with beheading tendencies plus White! What the heck had he done other than been the victim of common assault?

He wasn't the last Blue to suffer though because from then on it was as if Torquay had declared all-out war. Leonard in particular receiving more than his fair share of 'late' tackles. Accepted that they were fighting for their lives at the bottom of the league, but such tactics were disgraceful and under a less lenient referee many of their players would have walked. As it was they weren't even receiving a scolding. Bats were flying out of the West Stand in deep distress!

Blues though upped their game and as a result chances began to come our way. Barnard's shot from close range appeared destined for the back of the net but somehow it got deflected away for a corner. White then headed against the bar from the resulting dead ball situation. Whilst it was good to see some action at long last, such incidents only added to our growing frustration. Surely we weren't going to suffer yet another 0 – 0 draw!

## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

Barney then saw another chance blaze just wide of the far post after being set up by Hurst before Hurst himself tested the goalkeeper with a teasing drive that saw him scrambling all over his goalmouth before eventually saving it. Brown, realising that we finally beginning to tear Torquay apart upped the odds by weakening his midfield through the removal of Timlin in order to allow fresh, and fast, legs in the shape of new loan signing, again from Norwich, Jacob Murphy to come on.

This gave us width down both sides of the field and when another substitution, Eastwood on for Barney, occurred you could see the panic growing in the Torquay defence. We were merciful though and, keen not to let their suffering be over prolonged, we scored almost within minutes of Freddy making his appearance.

A goal mouth melee had ensued with the ball going here there and everywhere. Eventually though a ball crossed towards the far post got met, not by a Blue, but a defenders head instead. However rather than clearing the ball to safety the visiting player just headed it back towards whence it had come. Murphy, nicely positioned for just such an eventuality, gratefully controlled the ball before slipping it back across the mouth of the goal to where it met the foot of a certain Mr Eastwood. The rest, as they say, was history!

It's hard to say just what percentages of the resulting cheers that swept around the Hall were expressions of relief and which were those of joy. Pretty much a mixture of each I guess. And the goal changed the game because suddenly Torquay's keeper discovered that he could after all move faster than a music teacher approaching a room within which Marlene lurked. Almost from the start of the game he had been wasting time, but now, with the abyss of non-league football opening up in front of his team, he engaged gear and his goal kicks were much faster. Made no difference though because they were just meat and drink to Egan and 'White' who soon cleared them back up field.

It was now though that our weaknesses became apparent because although Freddy certainly had the wile to hold onto the ball, neither of two young loanees had much of a clue. This was allowing Torquay to have more of a say in the game and, despite it still only being a whisper, Brown sensibly responded by re-strengthening his midfield through the introduction of Laid at the expense of Loza who had had a good game, although never quite reaching the heights of Monday night.

Blues then played the game out to its conclusion, successfully procuring the three points that we needed to put our destiny firmly back into our own hands. Six games to go then, hopefully nine!! But there's still a lot of water to pass under the bridge before any Wembley appearance and hopefully will be able to keep it clear of any trolls. Some big games ahead though and things could very well be decided for us by events elsewhere, starting next weekend.

Come on you Blues!!

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### Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2014 Cheltenham 1 Southend 2



It was early in the morning when the lights in Uncle Albert's head suddenly started flashing. His eyes weren't sparkling because of too much cheap wine the night before (It was far too up market plonk for our itinerant elder anyway!). Instead, his blinking eyes indicated that an emergency situation had just risen somewhere upon the planet and that the Thunderbirds assistance was being requested.

Now our Headquarters have rarely featured in these reports but, as you might expect, it being the abode of none other than Mike, the cool, sophisticated pilot of Thunderbird II, it was its usual picture of quiet efficiency and calm. The receipt of an S.O.S therefore had little effect upon this relaxed scene although one could perhaps just detect a ripple of excitement building as more details began to arrive.

An incoming flight to the U.K had encountered problems and was in the process of being diverted to Heathrow Airport, London. Unfortunately the airfield in question lacked some of the equipment that was required to enable the plan's landing to come to a safe and successful conclusion. Accordingly the decision had been made to call in the services of Thunderbird II.

Well practised in such situations, the Thunderbird craft had been quickly launched and was already emitting soothing messages to the effect that help was on its way. Inclement weather conditions did though delay its final approach (Miles upon miles of abandoned traffic cones littered the M25, causing traffic to almost come to a halt!) but nevertheless the futuristic electronics aboard the Thunderbird craft directed Mike straight to the emergency scene, despite all the confusion.

Rarely has such a situation been dealt with such aplomb, and yes it must be said, no little skill. Indeed the whole situation was resolved with such sublime ease and competency that it is doubtful that any other users of the airport were even aware that an emergency had been declared! However, modest as ever, Mike was only



## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

interested in completing Phase II of his mission and so, its take off conducted under the usual security measures, Thunderbird II was soon back on course heading towards Gloucestershire.

Two other Thunderbird aircraft had submitted similar flight plans but, being piloted by two of the most senior members of our organisation (And therefore having 'dodgy engines'), they lacked the range to be able to complete the journey in just one step. Accordingly overnight stays had had to be arranged for them. If all had gone to plan though they too would by now also be airborne. But, bearing in mind that the situation had left poor Mrs T all on her own to control the family pest, somehow thoughts that one aircrew at least was still performing 'Bathroom jankers' did rather persist.

Gloucestershire is rather undulant country. The terrain bouncing up and down like a bouncy castle inhabited by hundreds of tiny rascals. It's rather pretty too and so, despite the cloudy conditions that had replaced the blue, sunny skies of the Essex Riviera experienced earlier in the day, spirits were high as Cheltenham's floodlights came into view. The ground itself is surrounded on all four sides by a housing estate. Accordingly mooring posts were at a premium, but eventually TBII was able to come to a rest not too far from the ground.

Flight conditions having been good, once the M25 had become but a distant nightmare, Mike and Micky Pearce (Over from Germany to get his fix of civilisation) had plenty of time to explore around before the gates opened at 1.30. Accordingly, having purchased water supplies from some locals manning a roadside stall, (Ok, so it was a onetime pub turned into a convenience store! But do you want Picasso to relate this story or some staid academic?) they ventured forth upon their adventure.

They soon discovered two startling things. The first being that a crown bowling green was situated right next to the grounds main entrance; the second, a wildlife enclosure where one was allowed, indeed enthusiastically encouraged, to feed the animals! Ok, again some rather broad brush strokes might have been applied to the latter. But how else would you describe a fenced off area with a locked gate, inside which sit the Greens, eating their sandwiches and begging for cake?

Mike and Micky joined them and Mike was soon testing out the garden furniture with some enthusiasm. He tried to get his fellow T'Birds to enjoy the experience too but they, being more interested in devouring food rather than participating in some healthy exercise, declined.

At the ground, friendly stewards informed us that, as not many Blues supports were expected, we could sit anywhere we liked in the covered stand behind one of the goals. Not good!

Hey, don't get me wrong! We were more than happy to choose where we sat. That wasn't the problem. No, the difficulty was Marlene! Given a choice involving more than one option, she prevaricates like a politician during an election. And so we tried that seat there, that one over there, what about that one. "Oh I don't know, how about that one!" It got to the point where even the amused steward had had enough. Accordingly he threatened her with having to sit in her allocated seat if she didn't make a decision soon!

Ten minutes later a sit down strike settled matters and so we sat, as always, directly behind the goal and just above the crossbar. Dangerous when Blues are practising their shooting but otherwise affording a good view of the pitch and game. We were soon joined there by Granddad, Uncle Albert and a rather harassed looking Mrs T. Having to frog march her errant husband from their hotel, past all the pubs and playgrounds had taken its toll. She now needed to sit down and relax for a couple of hours. Watching the Blues? Some hope!

Phil Brown had opted to stick with the same line up as had been victorious in its past two games save that Corr and Clifford were on the bench at the expense of Laird and Paine. Against a home side that featured two grunts as centre backs we wondered how that would play out. Corr, free off his three match ban for brushing an obstreperous opponents head with his hair, would surely have been better armoured for the encounters to come than Barnard. There again, Barney had recently opened his account and some signs of him forming a partnership with Loza has also been evident. We'd just have to wait and see!

Meanwhile the away end was rapidly filling up. So much so that a ribboned off area, where Micky and other had displayed their Southend flags, was in danger if being overrun. Only a thin orange wall of determined steward's stood between Cassandra needle work being torn to pieces and the Blues Voice. Micky's response was almost a blur as he rushed to the scene in order to strengthen its defences.

For long moments everything stood in the balance. Impassioned pleas on one side being met by firm shakes of the head from the other. A Mexican standoff, absent the sombreros, sunshine, sand, cigars ... ok it was nothing like one! .... but you get the landscape I'm sure. Then, with kick off about to take place, the deadlock was resolved. Cheltenham were already a goal up it seemed as the Blues Voice, in some disarray, departed from the battlefield. Behind them, still defiantly flying, Micky's flag waved them goodbye.

Blues started the game attacking towards our end of the field. However it was just like being at a home with all the play being on the opposite side of the pitch. How does the East Stand arrange that? This was a key

## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

Saturday in the chase for promotion, with many of our play off rivals playing teams fighting for the automatic places. Three points gained today would be very much to our advantage and yet, the way that this game started, we looked to be lucky if we even came away with none. We simply couldn't get out of first gear!

The pitch had been well watered prior to kick off. A mystery unto itself given that, certainly up our end of the field, a corner flag was already swimming in a puddle and the goalmouth looked like a scene from the Somme. Possibly this was the reason though why we looked like we were running about up to our knees in mud. It didn't explain though why our hosts were able to glide around the field, testing our defence from all angles and distances.

With the referee a confirmed Homer (He didn't miss one opportunity to award them a free kick whilst avoiding as best he could any decisions in our favour. Furthermore, he, on two occasions, actually got involved in play – his 'passes' strangely going straight to a Cheltenham player – whilst also, on too many occasions for it to be 'accidental', he strategically placed himself in the perfect position to form part of our hosts defensive wall!), it was obviously going to be another of 'those' days. But at least Mike and Boycie were getting an opportunity to exercise their vocal cords.

Not so the home crowd who, apart from one extremely optimistic plea, (Even with this ref!), for a penalty, made not a sound. We could have been playing inside a museum or wearing tank commander ear protection gear at a Marlene concert, for all the home support that we could hear. For our part, the Blues Voice, now that it had finally found a place to settle, were booming out their songs and chants, occasionally supported by the other Southend fans that had by now completely filled up all the away seats. Perhaps the home stewards should consider hiring better intelligence agents because this certainly was not the 100 or so Blues fans that they had been expecting. One could only hope that their management team's spies were equally as effective!

From the evidence on the pitch though they were all '007' class as, again and again, our attempts to clear our lines only resulted in the ball coming straight back at us. Fortunately though, although certainly 'stirred' our defence, once again ably led by Egan and Sokolik, was not 'shaken' and so our defensive stronghold was able to act as a base upon which we could build a foothold into this game.

We announced this fact that by Hurst having a good shot at goal which was well saved by their goalkeeper. In fact this formed the pattern of play for the most of the rest of the first half. Cheltenham would attack us with strength, only to find themselves so ably thwarted by our determined defence that Bentley's role was, in the main, reduced to just that of someone taking the occasional goal kick. Whilst we in turn, would attack them and, on most occasions, get to keep their goalkeeper's hands warm with either a header or a shot.

In fact, so well was Hurst delivering crosses, that we should have taken the lead. However too many times the ball would just travel inviting across the front of goal with no player, from either side, anywhere near it. So what the heck were Barnard and Loza doing?

In the latter's case, much of the game was passing him by. With Cheltenham continually hoofing hopeful, high, balls forwards, our midfield and defence often had little other option than to play head tennis with their hosts. This was not Loza's game at all, and it was certainly not one that played to his twin strengths of pace and ability to control the ball. Possibly the local Stavro Blofield had done his homework rather well where he was concerned too. Whatever, it all combined to mean that he was not having much of a role in affairs.

Which brings us to the dilemma that is Barnard. Undoubtedly the guy has added some skill to his game since he last played upon the pitch that is at the centre of the universe. The way that he turned two defenders inside out, before unleashing a powerful shot within minutes of his first game back at the Hall, revealed that. But what has happened to all that pace; that killer instinct in front of goal? The passage of time I guess is one answer, confidence perhaps being another. In either case, although the old Barney occasionally revealed himself, an entire iceberg remained hidden submerged below the surface.

There again, perhaps the fact that he was blatantly being either held back or pushed and shoved as he competed for the ball had something to do with our score remaining nil. How the referee or his linesman failed to see this happening, not even once, is beyond the realms of suspicion. And, if the authorities continue to back this 'Nelsonest' activity by their officials, especially when it occurs inside the penalty area, then the game is going to go the way of 'Professional Wrestling' and become laughing stock, if it not already is!

On one clear cut occasion, just before the break, Lee was taken out just as he was about to run clear at goal. Boycie felt that we didn't get an award because the incident occurred inside the penalty area. Mike however was not sanguine. Given the referee's desire to award us nothing, he was 100% sure that, even if the foul had happened outside the box, still no whistle would have been blown.

Exacerbating our, rather well being expressed, ire even further, was the fact that just seconds later, a kiss of a tackle by White was deemed punishable by a free kick. An event that placed Cheltenham firmly inside our half

## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

as the final minute of the first period was entered. A position that they then took full advantage off by scoring a beautifully hit shot from distance!

It was a well taken goal, even if the ball had fallen kindly to a home player situated just outside the box following a defensive clearance. Some thought that Bentley might have done better but, with his view of the ball blocked by both defenders and attackers, it's doubtful that he had more than a second to see the shot. What was certain was that our clean sheet tally was staying at 17 for the moment!

Spirits within the away stand were naturally rather depressed during the break but at least scores elsewhere were going in our direction; all our rivals either losing as well, or drawing. Most importantly of all, no one was actually winning. So, providing that we could somehow claw a goal back, not too much collateral damage to our dreams of promotion might be going to occur. A big 'If' though and with Cheltenham, once again, flooding the end that we would be defending (The one that you might recall that already had a well for a corner flag and a goal area consisting of mud), but somehow 'forgetting' to water the end that they were going to be attacking in the second half, the odds were rather being stacked against us.

Amongst the Thunderbirds, Boycie was concerned that our midfield was not being as effective as it might be. He wanted them to chase the ball better and close Cheltenham down much, much more! He had a point, because at times it had looked as if we had no midfield. However this was mainly due to two factors. One, they were bypassing Leonard, Timlin and co through the simple measure of booting high balls in the direction of our area, and two, whilst we were playing 4 4 2, they were lining up in a 4 5 1 shape which gave them the advantage of an extra man in the middle of the pitch.

It was therefore difficult to see how Brown, wishing to play two front men, could counter this. His half time natter with his players was therefore going to be both critical and a test of his management credentials. Get it wrong and our goal difference could become our only asset in our battle for Division 1 standings next term; get it right and a huge step (Providing other results continued to go our way) towards that very same goal would have been taken.

Blues certainly looked determined as they took to the field for the second period. Cheltenham though, for their part, looked uncertain as to whether or not to twist or stick. Their manager was obviously of a similar mind-set. Revealing his doubts by waiting for a few seconds to see first how we had set ourselves up, before introducing a substitute just a minute into the new half.

Not too sure what that was meant to achieve but, during the time that it took the home team to resettle themselves following the introduction and departure of their teammates, we took a grip upon the game. First, following a long throw by Leonard, a player who generally had a quiet game by his standards, Egan powered a header goal wards but as it was directed straight at their goalkeeper nothing came of it. Then, following a goalmouth melee at a corner, the ball fell to John White who blasted it towards the top corner of the net only to see the goalkeeper pull off a blinding save. Perhaps it wasn't going to be our day after all and, with time starting to run out fast, both nerves and fingernail tips were beginning to fray.

Brown responded by making two substitutions. Corr on for Barnard, and then a few minutes later, Murphy for Atkinson. Akkers had had a sound game, but with balls still continuing to fly overhead, Brown clearly had decided that he could weaken his midfield to the benefit of his attack, without incurring too much cost. Besides, this was a game that we just couldn't afford to lose!

It was gamble perhaps, but it was one that, unlike any of the Thunderbird's Grand National horses, came home as Corr, virtually with his first touch of the ball, equalised for Blues. We had been piling on the pressure but getting very little reward. Still our hosts weren't enjoying the experience and had taken to just belting the ball just about anywhere in order to keep us at bay. Equally, sensing blood, our chants of support had grown both louder and more sustained. Thus, with cries of 'Yellows, Yellows, echoing around their ears our super Blues stepped up one further gear and really began to roast the home team.

Sometimes the feel of a goal is almost tangible and the excitement was really beginning to build as we pushed forward. Reeling under our pressure, Cheltenham were having no choice other than to allow Loza more space in which to operate. Something that he was now doing to good effect. At the same time they were also having difficulties in containing Murphy's runs into their area. Something was surely going to give as their defence became more and more disentangled and unorganised.

And it did !, A neat passage of play, involving some neat interpassing between our players, resulted in the ball finding Corr, unmarked and hungry to score, just seven yards out from goal. The away stand was already bouncing and shouting with glee ages before the ball hit the back of the net!

As for Brown, his leaps of delight as he danced down the touchline were something to behold, and Blues? Well they were having a right old fashioned knees up down by the far corner flag. Corr being mobbed by everyone of his team mates save Bentley, whose smile of delight outshone the floodlights as he turned to face the away fans who were going absolutely ape behind his goal.

## NEWSLETTER – Vol. 9 Iss. 04. – April 2014

Wow, life was really feeling good now and watching on as Blues flew forward once again, looking to inflict even more injury upon our hosts, hopes began building that we might even score again. And, looking around the packed stand, you could see many other people harbouring the very same secret wish but none of us dared to even breathe it, lest it bite us back in some way.

Then all such caution got thrown to the winds as Hurst received the ball, out wide and in space, from Leonard. With no one, save the desperately advancing goal keeper, to beat, our hearts, and time, went still. Slow motion kicked in and then despair as Hurst appeared to have lost all control off the ball, kicking it way too far ahead of him. Surely the chance had gone but then, absolutely, flippin marvellously, totally unbelievably, there was the ball in the back of the net!

Fantastic scenes then ensued as we all went absolutely crazy. The team were dancing, we were dancing and Brown was in danger of being talent spotted as the next Bruce Forsyth! Fantastic, brilliant moments as everyone was shouting out "Yes, Yes!" This was living football at its very, very best and ok, we hadn't earned promotion yet. We weren't even close to doing so, but for a few moments there, it felt that just like we had. Hopefully it's a premonition of great times to come. But for now, no one was daring to speak of that just yet. Instead we were just very happily, standing up and singing at the top of our voices. The universe was just as it should be and Blues were winning again! Wonderful scenes, wonderful moments.

Gradually things calmed down again as we realised that there was still a job to be done. Cheltenham's manager had thrown his own dice on to the field in the form of two forwards in exchange for a defender and a midfielder. A strategy that resulted in the game getting a mite more tighter again. All this taken together with their, not all that secret, special agent who was masquerading about in a referee's kit, meant that no chickens could be counted just yet. Still, it felt real good to be winning!

Brown then played his final ace, replacing Hurst, who looked to be carrying an injury, with Conner Clifford. Boycie immediately started accepting bets based upon how long he would be on the field before being sent off. Five minutes being the average expectancy. But we were wrong and, together with Timlin; Clifford helped us to not only tie down midfield once again but also to keep attacking.

Cheltenham though were doing some attacking of their own and hearts were very much in mouths on one occasion close to the final whistle, when the ball ran loose just feet in front of our open goal following a decent bit of play by one of their wingers. But devious plans sometimes bite the hands that hatch them, and so it proved to be the case here. Because although a Cheltenham foot did indeed reach the ball first. The resulting shot nevertheless got slowed down by the sticky, muddy, goal mouth conditions just long enough for Egan to clear it to safety. We could all start breathing again, but had they not watered our end of the pitch at halftime.

Full time was blown soon afterwards and then the party upon the terraces really got underway. The team receiving riotous applause as they came over to thank us and bid us all a safe journey home. Such were our celebrations, especially as other 'positive' results came in, (Only York disappointing us by getting a scoreless draw, everyone else doing the decent thing and losing) that the rest of the ground was completely clear by the time we left. Indeed, the Thunderbirds were the very last supporters to leave the ground, the gates slamming shut behind us as we cheerfully started making our plans for the evening.

Unfortunately Albert, having eaten too many gob stoppers on the journey up (Mrs T was entitled to have arranged some quiet moments), had an upset tummy which sadly ruled him and his long suffering missus out. But the rest of us ventured into town to have a celebratory drink and a nice, companionable, meal before going our separate ways. Mike and Micky back to civilisation in the form of Essex whilst the Green's lingered longer, spending the weekend in a local hotel before returning home on Monday.

Throughout the evening, that lovely warm feeling that a win gives you kept flowing through us. Two points clear of our nearest rival and things are looking good. But there are still five more games to go before we will really know if our eggs have hatched. And even then our chickens might come home to haunt us in the playoffs. Possibilities of having to make more than one long trip to Fleetwood forming a small cloud upon the horizon.

However it works out though, distress at Wembley, Lakeland disappointment or no play offs at all, the wonderful feeling engendered by today's victory was more than enough for us to savour just for now!

Come on you Blues!!

11<sup>th</sup> April 2014