



So close and yet....

Another season is over, and we can only rue what might have been given some changes in just a few key areas. To finish marginally shy of the play-offs was some achievement given the circumstances Kevin Maher and his team had to contend with during the 2022/23 campaign.

On the pitch, there is absolutely no doubt that the National League is an extremely tough division, and what we don't need is yet another handicap in our efforts to exit in the right direction.

Kevin Maher made it clear that he needs clarity and quickly when he said: *"We need to act quickly if we're going to take this on,"* during an interview with BBC Essex. *"We're in a great position as a football department to take it forward and be up at the top end of the table next season. That's got to happen quickly, it's a big period coming up now. I know what I need to do, and what we need to do as a staff, but we need clarity on what's happening."*

The Trust is 100% behind Kevin and his team and would similarly plead with the outgoing owner to provide that clarity before it's too late.

Off the pitch...I mean really...could it have been any worse? Southend United FC endured four away fixtures against HMRC in the High Court facing winding-up petitions that could have resulted in liquidation, and at one stage the Shrimpers Trust was involved in initial plans to set up a phoenix club, such was the level of concern amongst supporters.

The protestations from our owner as to how much he has "invested" over the years continue to fall on weary deaf ears. Absolutely every year since he took over, he has personally been responsible for the budget, so any overspend (or lack thereof), planned or otherwise, is 100% down to Ron Martin.

The number of suppliers, directors, staff (and, indeed, the Trust) owed money is embarrassing and shameful. I hear there are seriously-interested parties in buying Ron's "opportunity" and I just hope that something can be concluded as soon as possible and before next season is ruined too.

The Trust movement generally recommends that a MOU (Memorandum Of Understanding) is agreed between Supporters' Trusts and Football Clubs. Such an agreement outlines how each party will communicate on key matters and includes provision for formal financial information to be forthcoming. At a recent Liaison meeting, we discussed (and Club CEO Tom Lawrence agreed) that it is now time to put such an agreement in place if we are going to continue working closely together.

Tom was particularly upset by the stance the Shrimpers Trust, along with other supporters' groups, had taken with regard to season ticket sales. Conversely, the Trust, along with those groups, were disappointed that season ticket prices had been announced without consultation. With seemingly nothing to suggest we might even make it through to the start of next season, it was very difficult to recommend anyone part with their money. That said, season ticket money is expected income and it is reasonable to expect that the Club would budget accordingly; the fact that their estimates of what might be received and by when seems as inaccurate as ALL other budgeting has been for the last 20 years explains why we find ourselves in this state.

We will continue to support Tom in trying to make Southend United the best it can be, both on and off the field. There is no doubt that, as CEO, he has an incredibly tough job, and we hope the impact he can make will only increase as the current owner exits.

And on that point, as I write, "evidence" of progress on a sale was provided to Judge Mullen at the High Court hearing on 17th May. Whether this was real evidence, or otherwise, will no doubt be realised in the coming weeks, but what is important for the fans is to try to make sure the situation we find ourselves in can never happen again. The concept of an MOU and/or the more widely-promoted 'Golden Share' gives fans a real say in the running and governance of their club, and it is this that the Trust will be focussing on as the sale progresses. If you'd like to know more about this issue, or indeed want to help in any way, please do get in touch.

The Shrimpers Trust has worked hard over the years to improve aspects of the football club and the community. 2022/23 was no different, and a summary of our projects and achievements for the year follows:

- Our **Social Inclusion** scheme continued with visits from the following groups: Badgers Den, National Youth Advocacy Service, Lancaster Lions and JRM Soccability. Thanks are due to Karl Lansley for all his work assisting the Trust, and to our sponsors.



- The Shrimpers Trust has always supported the **Club's Academy** and this year, was no different as we continued our official shirt sponsorship of the U18s team.

Unfortunately, the Academy is now at risk because of the removal of funding, and the unlikelihood that the owner will honour his commitment to continue this, meaning our 16th season backing youth development at Southend United may transpire to be our last. The Trust see the Academy structure as important to the future of the football club and are monitoring the situation closely.



- The Trust took back the administration (from the football club) of the **Junior Blues** for this season, and I hope you'll agree a welcome improvement was noted. Sadly, communication is still an issue, with membership forms dropped at the club not making it to our administrator. The Trust is working hard to try to resolve this. Nevertheless, several very successful sessions were provided for our future paying supporters. I'd also like to take the opportunity to thank Ken Adamson (of Greenhouse fame) for his donation to the Junior Blues this year; that donation really has made a difference to the youngsters and we applaud you for it.



- Due to a personnel change, our **retro shirts** got off to a slow start this season, but once our new supremo, Gary Williams, and World Retro got together the interest from supporters started to increase and the Retro Day when Dagenham & Redbridge visited Roots Hall in April was a particular success.

For the first time, this game saw the Trust set up a retro shirt stand inside the Club Shop and the interest from the public was amazing. A good number of shirts were sold, plus two Ukrainian scarves. Two new shirts, the 1998/99 home and away shirts, have been added to the Shrimpers Trust list, and the 2008/09 James Walker shirt will become available at the end of May. Money from our ever-expanding range continues to be donated to the Jeff Astle Foundation, who do so much to help with brain injuries within football.

- Our ex-players association, **SUEPA**, continues to go from strength to strength, and in increasing membership over the past year by 85 to just over 450 we are now claiming that it is the largest former players group in the UK, if not the world (and no-one has refuted that yet, so we are running with it). There were nine former player matchday visits during 2022/23, countless 'little things' done to help and recognise fans and former players alike, a wonderful sell-out Dave Smith tribute event back in February which raised over £3,000 for various causes and, as I write, the planning goes on for the biggest undertaking yet in arranging a benefit match for James Walker on 28th May-...-it is fair to say that it has been a busy and hugely positive period for all involved.



- Social media followers will have noted **supporters' groups** working together on matters affecting our football club, particularly over the past seven months. It would be fair to say that communication between the groups is much-improved generally, and, whilst we are not always going to agree on everything, each group respects each other's views and that makes for a healthy relationship.

- The Government's much-anticipated **White Paper** on Football Governance was well-received. The Trust have met with several MPs and even participated in the first 'think-tank' in Parliament, which was hosted by Southend West MP, Anna Firth, with two very specific aims. Firstly, we were seeking to raise the profile of Southend United's predicament and, secondly, we wanted to help the Government bring in the expected regulations to ensure that a club could never again find itself in the situation that we have in recent times.

- Conversations with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Football have also featured in our efforts to ensure as broad coverage as possible and, whilst the Trust does not take a political stance, it would be remiss not to mention the role Anna Firth has played in promoting the work of the club's fans in Parliament, as well as the interest she has shown in the club's plight. Anna became a Trust member during the spring and also joined a supporters' group call to answer questions, as well as sampling the atmosphere in the Blue Boar pub and the West Stand during the second half of the season.

- Our communication with the **Southend City Council** Executive has been a challenge, although this again has been helped, to a degree, by Anna Firth's involvement. The Council Executive appears to me to have been taken in by Ron Martin, and they are seemingly not interested in much apart from the construction of new homes as part of the wider Roots Hall and Fossetts Farm development. I do think it odd that a body that only exists to serve the people of Southend have so little interest in its largest leisure facility.

Getting the Council Executive to even agree to a set of minutes has been a challenge, but we have made representations regarding the latest planning application for Fossetts Farm and have established good contacts with those in the planning department to make sure our voices are, at least, heard.



- We were delighted to become one of the official sponsors of **Southend United Ladies** for this season, and are looking forward to continuing with that for the coming season. The squad joined us for our End of Season Awards evening in the Shrimpers Bar at Roots Hall in April and were even able to show off some silverware in the shape of the recently-acquired Essex Women's Trophy.

Fans are the lifeblood of football, and it is no different at Southend United. We are encouraged by Parliament's progress in seeking to implement the recommendations of the fan-led review into the ownership of football clubs and supporters' involvement in decision-making. The Shrimpers Trust has been very active in this area in the last twelve months. As well as attending that think-tank in Parliament, we were fortunate to be able to hold several meetings with

members of the All Party Parliamentary Group- for Football. Our aim is to keep the plight of Southend United in the public eye, and we are keen for our club to be used as an example of exactly how a football club should not be run. We hope to work with the shadow regulator as soon as they are appointed and, although it's probably too late for our current owner to be questioned/sanctioned formally, if we can help prevent similar issues at other clubs then our efforts will have been worthwhile.

Thanks to everyone who supported our events by helping out or contributing in some way. There are too many to mention, but you know who you are and we could not have achieved half the things we have without your help.



Particular thanks also to my Trust colleagues, many of whom give up a significant portion of the time to try to make Southend United and everything associated with it a better experience for all.

The Shrimpers Trust tries its best to represent the views and interests of all fans, but we accept we will not please everyone. We are an elected group of volunteers who act on our belief on what is best for the football club at any moment in time, and we are accountable to our membership. We are always looking to diversify our Board and membership; should you wish to be a part of this, please contact our chairman on chairman@shrimperstrust.co.uk We would love to have you involved!

I'll finish (almost) with an extract from a brilliant article penned by All at Sea's Jai Forsyth, who attended the latest High Court hearing alongside myself, Jim Harrington, James Schooley and Chris and John Phillips. I think this sums up my feelings completely and I'm sure will resonate with many of you:

"Supporting a football club with a permanent Sword of Damocles hanging over it is draining. When you have given your life to supporting it with every fibre of your being, the thought of having it taken away from you is so terrifying it keeps you awake at night, distracts you during your working day and reduces you to a monosyllabic grump in front of your wife and kids. None of whom have done anything to deserve having Ron Martin play an indirect part of their lives. It is almost perverse that, having finally got things right on the pitch after four long years of abject despair, Southend fans have been unable to truly enjoy the good football and impressive performances from an honest and likeable team without the worry of losing their club altogether."

Having got so close this year, I will repeat and reiterate my closing paragraph from last year as it is still pertinent. Southend United belongs in the Football League. We are in the National League due to mismanagement of our football club at the very top. We have our eyes firmly set on the future but cannot forgive or forget the mistakes that have been made until we see real tangible success and this season's improvements should not be seen as an excuse to settle for complacency in the 2023/24 season.

We wish you all the best for the summer and look forward to seeing you all next season.

Paul FitzGerald