



FOLLOW THE BLUES

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News from the Blues Followers

Thoughts and the Future

With our position in the league now more or less cemented, thoughts turn to an assessment of how we have progressed and the future. It is good news that Mike has already been in a position to make some quality signings and extend the contracts of a number of key players. The success of the Rights issue should also ensure that the Club is in a stronger position and hopefully this year may finally see the end of the overdraft.

In this issue Richard has given a personal view of the season from a Director's viewpoint. Many will have seen Geoff Appleton's award by the Club for his 300 games not out at the London Welsh match. It's a wonderful achievement. Finally, Chris Ward summarises the cost of running a semi-professional team in this league. His analysis underlines how important it is to work to increase the numbers coming through the gates.

Enjoy the rest of the season. I wish all the players, staff and supporters a relaxed and well-earned summer break.

Adrian Randall

A View from the Board

Billesley Common, Brickfields, Pillar Data Arena, Sandy Park, Whitefield (and soon to be Polson Bridge) represent glamorous locations which I have been fortunate to travel to for the first time this season as a long standing but often distant supporter of the Blues. Living away from the UK for the last 15 years has always made travelling to away matches difficult to do. This season though has been very different where a combination of moving back to the

UK and my recent appointment as Director has given me the opportunity to join the followers in supporting the players on the road.

One of the advantages of a Director is having access at matches to our opposite numbers to share openly our problems and everyday issues in running our respective clubs. It has been revealing, although perhaps no great surprise, to learn of the common issues that we all face on a day-to-day basis let alone about grappling with long term strategic planning. Finances, sponsorship, player injuries, twinning, ground facilities, promotion/relegation and the thorny question of league restructuring are all top of the agenda. It is therefore clear to me that the problems the Blues face are not unique but it is how the Directors and the operations team work together as a team to deal with each. We have a very strong rugby ethos at Board level backed up by a committed management team, who aim to strike the right balance between aspiring to be one of the top English semi-professional clubs whilst maintaining a strong traditional club and community spirit.

My transition to Director has been a steep learning curve, but has given me the opportunity to gain greater insight and understanding of how the club operates. In particular, how a relatively small but dedicated team of people behind the scenes put in immense effort to create a platform for the team to perform to their maximum on the field and for the club to put out a product which I firmly believe is as good as any where else in ND1 (excepting perhaps Northampton!).

At the core of many of the issues is funding. It is clear that the club strives to allocate the maximum affordable budget to the playing and coaching side. The back office team remains "lean and mean" and is "propped up" by many loyal supporters, the majority of whom provide their services for free. The club has therefore limited capacity in many functions, which in an ideal world would be expanded if more funding were available. Facing such constraints sets a ceiling on many initiatives that we would ideally like

to pursue, particularly on the commercial side and for ground improvements. We have been successful in increasing the proportion of income from our non-rugby activities, in particular through the marquee, which is showing a 50% increase on business over the prior year. On the commercial side, we have looked to increase and widen the channels in how we advertise the club, have introduced a new ticketing system, a new telephone system is in place and we are now looking into setting up an on-line sales facility for the shop merchandise.

We know that there are more things we can do and are always prepared to consider new ideas. The Directors do take note of ideas, which come through on the club web site. Many are reasonable and considered, while others are not particularly helpful or well thought out and can result in a negative effect on the people who are at the sharp end in helping to run the club to the best of their ability.

The Directors are always looking to do more, whether to strengthen the playing side or to improve the ground facilities on behalf of the supporters. Ultimately it is a balancing act due to financial constraints. The recent the rights issue provided a massive boost to the club, easing the pressure on the bank overdraft and giving greater flexibility in planning ahead for next years campaign viewed as critical by all ND1 clubs in anticipation of a major league restructuring effective for 2009/10.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Geoff and the other Directors for inviting me on board. I have thoroughly enjoyed my first year and look forward to the future in working together with all parties to promote the continued success of Bedford Blues. I am already looking forward to my next year's away trip to Cross Green and a Black Sheep (or two!).

Richard Glasspool

302 Not Out

Adrian has asked me to write 300 words about my 300 consecutive League and Cup games following

the Blues. So where do I start! My first game was at Sale on 12th September 1998 and the 300th against London Welsh on March 8th 2008. The 100th was against Henley in 2001 and coincidentally the 200th was also against London Welsh in 2005.

Throughout these years I have been able to travel the length and breadth of England (and Wales) supporting the Blues, as well as travelling to Rovigo and Castres. The latter two were excellent trips with the hospitality shown by both clubs being second to none, and emphasised the true spirit of the game.

I have seen many players come and go, but Junior Paramore still stands out as "the" model professional of the time but that is not to deny the commitment of the present squad.

Of all the games, the successful Twickenham final stands out as the most exciting and enjoyable. To see the team you have followed for years lift a trophy at Twickenham is a truly rewarding experience. Closely following this was the semi-final at Exeter and none of us will ever forget that drop goal from Ali Hephher to win the match 37-35 with the last kick of the game. It was the best trip back from the West Country that we have ever had.

Two League games stand out as the most nerve wracking - the 39-0 victory at West Hartlepool which avoided automatic relegation and the drawn game 17-17 at Otley which kept us in Division 1.

I now look forward to the last 3 games to complete 10 full seasons.

The friendship of all the Blues supporters, especially those who travel regularly, has made all the trips worthwhile.

Geoff Appleton

£212.50 per minute!

It's that time of year to reflect on the Blues progress off the field as well as on, and the arrival through the letterbox of the AGM notice and Accounts for last year focuses the mind on the economics of professional rugby, and the semi-professional category that is our lot. Blues Turnover (total income) continues to rise year on year which not only reflects the growing support on

match days through the gate but also the clever development of the Marquee and increased revenue from sponsors and advertisers. But despite increased support and income, the accounts show that we lost £91,141 over last season.

The season to April 2007 was the first with a 16 team league giving the benefit of two extra home games, but the contribution from The RFU and Premiership Clubs was accordingly reduced because the kitty they provide had to be divided between 16 teams, not 14. Other income last season continued to grow in all areas and shows an increase in total on 2006 of 14% to £1,379,044. But the costs of running the Club, of course, rose as well. The cost of getting the players on the pitch, coaching them and keeping them fit, as well as that other vital aspect of our undertaking - serving the beer! - constituted 60% of our total trading income in 2007, but that at least is consistent with the previous year. Control of the other running costs has been excellent, with a marginal reduction in overhead expenses of close to 1%.

The numbers above reflect the continuing improvement in the Blues fortunes and the skilful financial management of what appears - frankly - to be an insoluble problem in the circumstances of semi - professional rugby. We cannot be alone in this; we can only guess at the finances of our fellow league members where the overall average league gate of the lowest ten, in terms of attendance, is only 966 per game. Blues average league attendance *this season* is a creditable 2370, but last season, with an average of 2197 per game, the Accounts show we lost £91,141 over the year. How do the others survive? Our hoped for breakeven position remains elusive and there is no miracle cure available unless the RFU can devise a future strategy that will deliver an appropriate level of support for our 2nd tier league. Until they do, willing shareholders will be needed to ensure the Blues financial survival. The recent highly successful Rights Issue is proof, if proof were needed, that the support is there, ready, willing and able to contribute.

But since our Reformation in 1999 the Club has spent in total up to June 2007, £1,802,663 more than it has earned. Shareholders and lenders alike have provided that deficit.

For 7 full seasons at say 30 games a season that adds up to £8,500 per game played. If you only support the Blues at home, think of it this way - £17,000 to put on every home game in addition to the money on the gate, from the sponsors and the bars and all other sources. And those other sources include donations, from the Followers and numerous other benefactors, without which the losses last season would have been considerably more.

£212.50 per minute! But worth every penny!

Enough's enough. The RFU must now recognise, surely, after ten years of professional rugby, the contribution that our league and the lower tiers make towards the development of the game, and reward it accordingly. Don't hold your breath though!

Chris Ward

Quiz Night

On Friday 14th March 13 teams came along to the Scrum Hall to pit their collective wits against the question setter and each other. By the end of the evening the Green Oaks team of John and Margaret Saunders with their friends including Neil Roy emerged winners by a clear margin. The Friday Nighters with club President Gareth Davies, Marie and their friends came second. The "strongest" team was The Squirrels made up of Shotbolts and Stanbridges. Margaret and Geoff sorted out the raffle and Lynda Smith and her helpers the buffet. My special thanks go to them and to Lynne and Sue, my "human computers". Thanks to everyone who came along.

Jackie Markham

AWAY TRIP

Launceston 19th April. Check with Margaret for information.

Next Issue:-

Beginning of next season!!

Please let me have your views either via the committee or arandall69@btinternet.com

The views expressed in this Newsletter are the authors and do not represent the views either of the Followers Association or Bedford Rugby