

## A Rousler's Diary

**We welcome back Daniel Williams and his column to the programme after a 5-year absence**



A Rousler's Diary is back. The Rousler has been roused and, picking up his pen, has swooped from his perch in the tangled woods of Beacon Hill, and come to settle on the old tin roof of the Thomas Jones stand.

Maybe it was the smell of Bovril and beer and hot sausage rolls, or the sight of the sacred turf, freshly manicured. Perhaps it was the old vibe of *The Bromsgrove Boys*, making all the noise and the clack of the turnstiles, the *ooohs* and *aaahs*, the shouts of delight and disgust. Maybe the prospect of derbies against Redditch, Alvechurch and Stourbridge, or a young squad strengthened over the summer and ready for battle. No respectable creature, however great and mythical, could resist the lure. There is the same old the tug at the heartstrings, the longing for success, the sure knowledge that it is the hope that kills...

But a pre-season thriller against Macclesfield last week was certainly enough to get the juices flowing. Pre-season friendlies don't matter, right? Try telling that to the Sporting line-up as they battled for a place in the team, as the tackles flew in as

decisively as the free kick that sealed the victory. It was a teaser for what's to come over the next ten months.

And what a way to start this new season, against neighbours Redditch United. Redditch might have given the world the needle but they're coming to the town of nails and Michael will be hammering home the message that the only neatly threaded passes at the VG today will come from Sporting as we sew up victory number one and pin our first three points on the board. You can't win the league in the first game of the season but it's important to strike while the iron's hot, while the Shed's in full voice.

Things seem to change quickly these days and the new season swings round in the blink of an eye. Ups and downs dictate the pattern of our lives and sometimes even football must take a back seat. The banner on this stand reminds us how brief our time is, how we must make the most of what we have and remember with a smile those who are gone. We do them honour with our efforts on and off the pitch and, with a fair wind and the usual magnificent support of the Victoria Ground faithful, we will celebrate together come May. This is our little corner of the world and things are a little more manageable when there's a match to look forward to, a dream to chase. Football can make a difference. It's good to be back.

**Daniel Williams this week muses on Dick Turpin and our opponents' industrial background**

### #2 v Coalville Town

There's nothing quite like a satisfying season opener in the beautiful August sunshine, and the Redditch game was nothing like satisfying, the weather nothing like August. Storm Anthony played a decisive role in a game which Sporting largely bossed but somehow lost. Redditch headed home knowing that the last time such a daylight robbery was committed, Dick Turpin patrolled the Highway. The boys stood up to a niggly opponent and a 72nd minute goal from Prince Henry seemed enough to secure a deserved win, but two late set-pieces delivered the loot to the visitors and sent the soggy faithful home disappointed.

But at least we were back on familiar ground with England's women at the world cup. In case we were in any danger of getting carried away and maybe even finding solace in our national team, the nail-biting, nervy and somewhat fortunate progression into the quarterfinals plonked us back into the reality that we're used to.

While there was frustration at the final whistle against Redditch, there were also many positives. Only two balls were lost over the stands in ninety minutes and that is an indicator of the way that Sporting want to get the ball on the ground and play to feet. It won't always be possible in this division but there was shape and intention and an abundance of smart football which suggests that something special could happen at the VG this season. A crowd of over 700 was witness to some fine individual displays but more significantly, of a team united and fighting for the cause.

Today's opponents missed out on top spot last season by dint of inferior goal difference and travel to Bromsgrove



looking to make amends for an opening match defeat. It was 1-1 last time around and promises to be another cracker - let's hope that it's only the opposing team that we have to battle against this week. The Ravens travel from the old mining town of Coalville whose motto is, somewhat fittingly, "From the earth, wealth" and Sporting will need to dig deep and play with the same intensity as last week in order to start climbing the league table. There are deep seams of quality that run through our team and they'll be looking to mine more than coal. There's a sense that when the front line hits form it'll be diamonds fit for a prince that will be struck.

### **Daniel Williams this week looks at stress levels when watching football and the origin of our opponent's nickname.**

#### #3 v Stamford AFC



The VG is not being kind to Sporting at the moment with two great wins on the road but two disappointing defeats at home. Making the VG a fortress as it was in those heady days of successive promotions is going to be a key part that the Sporting supporters can play this campaign. Banging those fences, singing those songs, sucking the ball into the back of the net and putting fear into the opposition each time they step onto the pitch are what's needed now that the season is in full swing and if we want to lift from mid-table mediocrity and challenge for honours. But beware of being drawn too much into the passion of the moment...scientists who tested Brazil supporters after their humiliating 7-1 defeat to Germany in the 2014 World Cup found that levels of the hormone cortisol, which regulates stress levels, were off the charts and akin to the trauma of deep personal grief or the threat of serious bodily harm. The fluctuation between joy and stress when watching a match can, say the experts, put strain on the heart and lead to irrational

behaviour.

So please, Sporting, let's not have too many more games like the ones that we've already seen. 2-0 by half-time and a tidy three or four goal margin at the final whistle would be lovely and help the pint go down a bit easier.

Stamford are known as The Daniels after the UK's heaviest man, Daniel Lambert, who died in the Lincolnshire town two centuries ago. At his death he weighed over 52 stone and it is said that six men could fit inside his breeches. One can only wonder what sort of strain was on his heart before it finally gave out – and he wasn't even watching the football.

But don't expect an easy ride against today's opponents, though. Newly-promoted Stamford are undefeated in the league so far, recording a decent win at home to Kettering and thumping Redditch 3-1 away. Let's hope for a solid performance from our new emerging stars and be thankful that Daniel Lambert isn't between the sticks.

### **Daniel Williams this week looks at bending the rules a bit at football and er.....cheating**

#### A Rousler's Diary #4 v Kettering Town



Is it possible to win a game of football these days without bending the rules a little bit? In fact, is it so intrinsic in the modern game that teams who don't bend the rules are left cradling the virtues of honesty and fair-play while their less scrupulous opponents collect the trophies? We all spilled our noble indignation each time Klinsmann dived, or when Rivaldo clutched his face and got his opponent sent off. Remember Ronaldo v Rooney, Beckham v Simeone? There was some very British comfort to be found in the fact that

we had lost only by dint of the fact that the opposition had cheated. The trouble with this stiff upper lip and grin and bear it attitude is that it doesn't win football matches. Germany, Portugal, Brazil and Argentina didn't seem to be lamenting their lack of morality and good manners as they paraded the trophies that they won in those tournaments.

What those teams had was the ruthlessness that is needed if a team wants to be more than a group of players and become a winning unit. If you were at the VG a couple of weeks ago you might have noticed that the opposition captain, from the very start of the match, was chipping away at the officials. Every little decision was questioned; every opportunity to put doubt in the referee's mind was taken. It was a master class in mind-games. Sporting were the better team



with the ball but that's not the only place that football matches are won. In the last few minutes, after relentless pressure, the referee finally caved to the player's relentless pressure and awarded a free-kick on the edge of the box and then a penalty. Both were converted (by said player) and Sporting ended up with the moral high-ground but zero points. I cannot imagine that the opposing side spent the journey home searching their souls and asking for forgiveness.

When the legendary Rousler swoops down from the hills to snatch away the unwitting he doesn't worry about whose plant pots he might upturn or whose knitting he might disturb. He gets in there, does the job and then crunches the bones. He is ruthless. The points return at the Victoria Ground remains nil after three games and something needs to change. Impressive results away from home suggest that there is the ability in this group of players to do well: this fortress needs to be a place that other teams fear to tread and where opposing captains are not allowed to control the narrative, even if that means bending the rules a little bit.

### **Daniel Williams this evening makes a link between the anti-hero of a book by Halesowen author Francis Brett Young and being a football fan.**

#### #5 v Halesowen Town



One of Halesowen's most famous sons is a writer called Francis Brett Young. He was popular at the start of the 20th century and his novels and poetry were rooted in his native Worcestershire, though like our own AE Housman, he was drawn to the Shropshire Hills and the Welsh borderlands. One of his most popular tales was *Mr Lucton's Freedom*, which follows the adventures of Owen Lucton who, unhappy with the smoke and grime and noise of the big city, ditches it all and walks, literally walks, west. He leaves all that he knows, passes villages and towns, through swamp and wood and ends up in the barren wilderness of the Marches. It's a moral tale, really, and it teaches us

that where we're from is probably where we belong, that the grass isn't always greener. That the current dry season at the VG will eventually come to end...*The House Under the Water* perhaps demonstrates that point better than most as the local villagers are forced to flee their homes in the Elan Valley as the dams are built and the waters rise. Be careful what you wish for.

Brett Young wrote poetry, too, namely an epic called *The Island*, from whence come the lines:

*He rode as lonely and as free  
As a ship that sails an empty sea.*

And while this might describe what the Sporting faithful have seen from the front line in recent home games, it also offers hope that the promised land might not be too far ahead. The Prince might be gone but the throne remains, waiting for a new hero. We need a thumping win, a convincing drubbing, a hat trick hero. No more *nearlys* and *oh so closes*, no more being outvoiced by a handful of away supporters. The Victoria Ground has been quiet all season, the Rousler's roar has been tamed and it won't be long before he slinks back to his perch on Beacon Hill, forked tongue silenced, tail between his legs.

But there's something in the air, something tangy and sharp like the autumn winds that have started to blow, the hackles have been stirred and out of the darkness, under the floodlights, the beast will rise.

Halesowen Town's home ground is called The Grove; tonight they must be outplayed, outsung, outmuscled and outthought in Bromsgrove. This is our home and while it might be tempting to ditch it all and head out somewhere else, we'll always come back, rain or shine, drought or flood, just like Mr Lucton did.

### **Daniel Williams today reflects on Tuesday's match against Halesowen then looks at the FA Cup and a few teasers.**

#### #FAC1 v Chelmsford City

On Tuesday the Rousler's Diary asked for the VG to roar, and boy did it roar! Under a clear autumn sky and a nearly full moon, in front of more than 1300 fans and in the glare of the floodlights, it felt as though this season had finally kicked off.

Halesowen brought their masses and there was a danger that the packed Town End would drown out the Shed. On fifteen minutes there was that familiar sinking feeling: Sporting were a goal down. But heads didn't drop and it

wasn't long before Sporting were level thanks to a superb team goal that subdued the away faithful and cleared the way for Tee's worldly from the edge of the box. It could have been more but three goals and three points from a confident and high-flying Halesowen was just what the doctor ordered. The Prince may be gone but King-Harmes reigns supreme at fortress VG. A happy walk home in the chill air. Serenity. Pais. And now, breathe.

A little break from the relentless ups and downs of the league and the simpler challenge of knock-out football as we pick our way through the world's oldest club competition.

You probably already know the FA cup final was played in 1871 between the Royal Engineers and The Wanderers at The Oval in London and that The Wanderers won 1-0, but can you answer these FA cup teasers?

- Which team has been to the most FA cup finals without winning?
- Which team has held the trophy for the longest amount of time?
- What unique event happened in both the 1946 and 1947 finals?
- How many cup final hat-tricks have there been?

Bromsgrove Rovers made it to the 3rd round of the FA cup in the 1993/4 season, losing out to two late goals from Barnsley in front of almost 5,000 here at the VG. Viv Anderson, the Barnsley manager at the time, called his team "the luckiest in the world." It has been pretty slim pickings since then and Chelmsford City, from the tier above, will be no walk-over today.

There's another round after this one before the cup proper, but the early rounds re the place to dream, and the with the spirit shown on Tuesday and the Shed rocking, who knows...

### **Tonight, Dan Williams reflects on supporting your local team**

#### **#6 v Mickleover**

Dedication to a football team comes in many forms. The UK's most loyal supporter is reportedly Rob Shannon, who has clocked up 2,300 consecutive games watching his beloved Blues. Only the pandemic put a stop to a run that extends back to the 1974 victory over Derby County. Rob even admits that that his love for Blues was probably the reason that he divorced his Villa-supporting wife.

But what is it that drives so many of us to pitch our lot in with a bunch of strangers in shorts on cold winter nights when we could be snug in front of the telly watching Netflix or Disney+? What is it that makes the pursuit of that 70cm sphere of synthetic leather and latex, inflated to a pressure of 16 psi, such a draw?

It can't be the satisfaction of the thing hitting the back of the net – there's no guarantee of that. In fact the average goals per game across the country is less than three and there's a 38% chance that there will be no goals at all. Of course there's always the option of selecting a team whose chances of winning are greater than the team round the corner, and that's an ever-increasing option these days as well as being one of the reasons that BT and Sky are thriving while lower-league crowds are struggling. Let's be honest, it's not easy watching any team lose week in, week out. It's not cheap any more and there are so many other things that could, and probably should, be taking up time on a Saturday afternoon. And maybe that's it...

A couple of hours at the football is an excuse to get out of the routine of the rest of the week; it's a chance to avoid the shopping, the broken washing machine, the out-of-control lawn. In short, it's a place to belong and a place to feel those emotions that are usually stored away at the back of a drawer. Even losing, even the most unjust and unfair and downright ridiculous decision that costs precious points are welcome emotions, because they're shared emotions. Who does the United fan in Catshill, the Chelsea fan in Charford, the Arsenal fan in Aston Fields share those emotions with when the wins roll in? A gloomy walk home after a defeat is still a walk home from something that mattered, but at the same time didn't really matter.

Rob Shannon hasn't supported his team all this time because he thinks they're going to win, he supports them because it's his team, his thing, and that's why most of us are here at the VG tonight. It's why those hardy souls at the other end of the ground have travelled all the way from Mickleover to watch *their* team. Whatever the result, at least you were here (and not fixing the sink...walking the dog...putting out the bins...)

This afternoon, Dan Williams looks at penalties, 'nuff said!

### **#7 v Hitchin Town**

A hard-fought draw from the team that's running away with the league on top of the three that we took from second-placed Halesowen a couple of weeks ago are not a bad recent haul and mean that Sporting have suffered only one defeat in the last five league games. It was not the first time that we've let the lead slip and not the first time that we've lost points from the spot, though. By the calculations of a lowly Rousler, those opposition penalties have already cost Sporting eight points this season. It's the finest margins: the timing of the tackle, the whim of the referee and luck of the bounce, but those eight points would see us snug and smug in second place...

But that's football, isn't it? It's a game where all the week's training, all the planning and tactics, the physical and mental preparation and all the best intentions can dissolve in a puff of smoke, or the puff of the referee's whistle. Maybe if the VG was more of a fortress a few more decisions might go our way. It's probably no surprise that in the period between 1993 and 2012, only a single away penalty was scored at Old Trafford. It would be churlish to suggest that the officials were swayed by the home crowd and the reputation of Manchester United (not to mention the wrath of Roy Keane), and it's probably true to say that for most of the time the ball was down the other end of the pitch. But still. There has to be something in it. Interestingly, though, United's own penalty haul has dwindled somewhat recently. They were only awarded five last season, compared to six the season before and ten the year before that.

It was an Irishman, Billy McCrum, who, in 1890, first proposed the penalty kick as a means of penalising infringements 'within 12 yards of the goal'. Ironically, he was a goalkeeper, and there were a few key differences from what we know today. Principally, there was no box, so the awarding of a penalty kick was down to the discretion (and ability to measure yards on the hoof) of the referee. Also, a penalty would only be awarded if the attacking team appealed for it. The player taking the penalty was allowed to dribble as much as he liked and the goalkeeper could encroach six yards off his line. Chaotic, maybe, but much more fun to watch – and enough to melt VAR monitors up and down the country.

Of course most penalties (76%) go in, which is why the celebration of the award of a penalty is often as enthusiastic as a goal. But not always, which is why a missed penalty (24%) or, even better, a penalty save (11%), brings an even greater celebration.

As a nation we have suffered at the hands of the penalty kick. During the past few decades it was taboo to even mention the word after famous defeats at the hands of Germany, Argentina, Portugal and, most recently, Italy. In fact, of England's ten shoot-outs in major tournaments, only three have gone our way.

Of course the answer is simple: score enough goals of our own so that the odd penalty here and there doesn't matter. In cup games, win outright and avoid the shootout.

We welcome Hitchin town today where a decent win will see us match them on points. Let's hope there are no dodgy penalties to mull over come five o'clock....

### **In honour today's visitors, Dan Williams takes a few liberties with Shakespeare**

#### **#9 v Stratford Town**

Welcome, Stratford Town, to the Victoria Ground. Here's one for the bard...

#### **The Seven Ages of (a Football) Man (or Woman)**

All the world's a stage, Shakespeare said.  
Sometimes all the world's a football pitch, too,  
And the men and women merely players.  
They have their entrances and their exits  
One minute adored, the next abhorred  
And every player in his time plays many parts,  
His acts determined by the life in his knees. At first the infant,  
Mewling and begging for the replica shirt  
Then the winning school-boy with his first team place  
And shining morning face, sprinting the rutted field



Unwillingly to school. And then the lover  
 Sighing like furnace, with skin fade and pony-tail  
 Made to woo the fans in the stands. Then the soldier  
 Full of strange oaths aimed at officials,  
 Mindful of injustice, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
 Defender of each tiny advantage, the extra yards to let fly  
 A cannon in goal's mouth. And then the coach  
 In fair round belly with trainers, not studs;  
 With eyes severe, on the prowl for shirkers,  
 Full of wise interjections and words for the ref.  
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
 Into the office upstairs, the leather shoes, formal tie  
 With spectacles on nose and pint nearby,  
 His dreams stowed from a world too wide  
 For his shrunk shank and his big manly voice.  
 Trudging at last to his own place in the stands,  
 Childish once more with whistles and jeers and  
 Sometimes cheers, until last scene of all,  
 This strange and eventful career and in the centre, a ball.  
 Finally a different kind of dribble, then mere oblivion:  
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

**This evening, Dan Williams continues his Shakespeare theme and muses on the importance of words.**

#### #9 v Alvechurch

On Remembrance weekend, a result to forget.

The bards came, saw and conquered, taking the spoils of the six-pointer. It was an organised display by the Rouslers, though, and the game was always in the balance. The biggest take-away was another worldly from Connor Tees and the two new loanees look like they will add to the attack and put pressure on places.



The Rousler's Diary was dedicated to Shakespeare and to stay on that theme a little let us recall a scene from perhaps his most famous play, where the lovelorn Juliet of the Capulets laments falling in love with Romeo Montague but gets tangled up in the importance of a mere word: "What's in a name?" she says. "It is not hand, nor foot, nor arm nor face, nor any other part..."

Shakespeare explores a vast and evocative subject in that short scene and Juliet urges her lover to cast aside the word: "doff thy name" she says. And she's right...to a point. A name is only a word. In the same way that "sticks and stones might break our bones but words will never harm us" or how the chants from a passionate crowd at the top of the shed might be mere syllabic utterances. But Juliet is naïve and unworldly. Names *do* matter and words *do* have power. Shakespeare himself said that "The pen is mightier than the sword." And perhaps nowhere is the identity that a name brings more important than in the emotive world of football.

We attach ourselves to our badge and we feel in our blood the resonance of those words that identify our tribe. Wolves, for some, might be wild ancestors of our domesticated companions but for those that *know* it is a lifelong passion; a place to belong and identify with, the same way that, for many, 'Villa' does not conjure images of a fancy house on the Costa del Sol. Words do matter.

In the next few weeks that whole issue will be wrangled with here at the Victoria Ground: does the club retain the Sporting nomenclature by which it has been known since 2010, or does it pick up the name of 'Rovers' held by the town's football club since 1885?

Nobody owns words. Shakespeare contributed 1700 of them to our language but he didn't own them. It's what we do with them, how we associate them that matters. As we go to the polls let's just remember that:

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"

and it's how our efforts supporting the team combine with theirs on the pitch combine to bring the success that we're all thirsty for. At the end of the day if the football team from Bromsgrove one day lifts a trophy at Wembley, this Rousler won't care what suffix is attached...

On a personal note, I'll be hoping there won't be any intention to replace your friendly flying mythical mascot with that old boar from times of yore....

## Dan Williams - A Rousler's Diary #12

### This week, our resident columnist muses over football and the festive season

'Tis the season to be jolly, they say, but it has been a lean time in recent weeks: out of the cups; points dropped in the league and a series of unfortunate events threatening to put a dampener on the festivities here at the VG. The fickle finger of footballing fate seems to have been as miserly as that infamous old codger in the most famous Christmas story of them all:

"Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!"

Tuesday night a couple of weeks ago my youngest little elf told me that she was certain she'd seen Santa's sleigh from her window flashing past All Saints Church tower. "Nah," I said, "Just another shot off target at the Shed End."

Sunday last week, once I'd managed to lop off the surplus three feet (about twelve quid's worth) of excess Christmas tree so that it would fit in the lounge, was spent unknotting tangled threads of dusty bulbs and dangling from the guttering attaching lights to the front of the house, all the time wondering how much these festive decorations were adding to my electricity bill in these times of austerity...

"Bah," said Scrooge, "Humbug."

But sometimes, conducting wonderfully monotonous and simple tasks, provides the perfect opportunity for mulling over life's great mysteries, like: *How does Santa actually get down the chimney? Why does it never snow in Bromsgrove? And how did we not win against Leiston last Saturday..?* The man in the red suit uses magic, I decided, and the lowly geographical position of our town means that precipitation generally, disappointingly, falls as rain. Easy.

The third one, though, stumps me still. It was a frustrating, if entertaining match, that one, and shows that we really do need to stick away those chances when they come along. The ref handed out more cards than Moonpig and it was only the woodwork that kept Leiston in it and left Rouslers with the solitary point.

No wins since October and only two points in the last seven games leaves us deep in the mire at 17th in the league and only two points off the drop zone.

We welcome Stourbridge and a bumper crowd to the VG on this most sacred of football days today. Boxing Day is, of course, traditionally a day for giving alms to the poor, a time when the wealthy collected food and gifts (the Christmas box) for the subservient. But let's focus on the opponent's box today and not give away any gifts in our own. In the spirit of old Ebenezer, let's hope that we can smash the Glassboys and start climbing the table. A win this afternoon will lift us above Stourbridge in the league and set the tone for the challenges that wait in the back half of the season.

It will probably be chilly in the VG today, no doubt damp, but imagine: you could be at the Next sale or queuing to get into Merry Hill. Let's hope for better fortunes in the New Year than we had in the old one. Let's hope for peace on earth and Pais on target.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

