

## **THE WEEKEND IT ALL BOILED OVER – Paul Breen**

**The news that Trevor Kettle is to referee this weekend's Charlton v Middlesbrough game has brought back fond memories for Paul Breen, author of *The Charlton Men*, of Easter 2012 when he was in New York following the antics of the Addicks from afar. Though he didn't see Mister Kettle's Show in the Wild North West, he feels as though he was there in spirit and has captured it in this story.**

Things were very different to the way they are these days, back at Easter 2012. We'd just beaten Leyton Orient on the last day of March, and after forty games Charlton AFC had achieved the grand total of eighty five points, leaving us six points clear of Sheffield United, eight clear of Wednesday, and so far ahead of the rest they didn't even count anymore.

By the time we played our 41<sup>st</sup> game I'd be far away – on the other side of the Atlantic on a work trip to America, where I was managing to squeeze in a short break for the missus in New York City.

When Saturday arrived, it was strange following the Addicks from afar. We'd just arrived in New York the day before in a crowded, chaotic dawn. After settling in, we'd gone to a local pub in Flushing for lunch. There was a young Irish barmaid who kept giving us free drinks, as if she'd never before met anyone crossing over from the old country. By the time we finished drinking, we knew we'd suffer in the morning and the hangover make the jet lag ten times worse. Sarah, my wife of six months, had never been to America before. She was with me in New York for five days. Then she'd go home to London and I'd head off to a conference in Oregon.

'Let's go downtown,' she said on the morning after, 'and see the shops.' 'Doesn't sound so different to a Saturday in London,' I suggested.

But there was one major difference, a time difference of five hours. When we'd woken up, heads humming from jet lag, it was already two in the afternoon back home. League One's big game of the day had started an hour ago. That was the Yorkshire derby between Huddersfield and Sheffield Wednesday.

My old university town had the home advantage and needed the win to stay in the promotion hunt. When I switched on the computer I was surprised to find unsecured wireless in a place like this. We were staying out in my aunt's house in the north-central part of New York. Once upon a time this had been a predominantly Irish and Greek area. These days it was mostly Korean and Chinese – nearly as exotic as Woolwich!

'There's so much to explore, just here alone,' Sarah remarked.

And there was; too much to sit around staring into a computer all morning. After breakfast we'd catch the train into Manhattan. First though I'd check the scores. Just as I logged in, Wednesday had taken the lead. Miguel Llera, formerly of Charlton, scored from a free kick. Ten minutes or so later, they'd scored a second. Nile Ranger, on loan from Newcastle, smashed home a vital second goal. After that, Charlton needed a result at Oldham. If we got a draw in each of our away games and a win in the home games, we'd win the league. It was as simple as that. But while the Addicks were doing battle up in the Pennines, I was heading downtown.

Though I wasn't following the game at the time, this is roughly how the day progressed. Three o'clock, we catch a bus to Flushing as the game kicks off. We're looking at streets full of Korean and Chinese lettering as Charlton go on the attack from the start, as they'd done against Orient the Saturday before. Then, like Orient, as we're taking the Port Washington line to Manhattan, the game turns stop-start. Free kicks come and go like stations on the way to the city centre. Half an hour gone, we dip into a tunnel.

Meanwhile, at Boundary Park, Danny Hollands gets sent off for a late two-footed lunge. It's bath-time, something he must be used by now with his triplets. By the time our train stops, Charlton are down to ten men. We come out of the station, climb the steps, and find ourselves right beside Madison Square Garden. Around the walls, we see pictures of just about everybody who's ever been famous in America. Our brains are swimming in images of things we've been exposed to all our life but never seen in the flesh.

There's Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show on one side, Barnum & Bailey's Circus on the other. We can see WWF wrestlers, New York Rangers hockey players, rock stars, and tennis players. It's like the picture round in a pub quiz. There's Jimmy Connors, and Hulk Hogan. That's Muhammad Ali and Joe

Frazier slugging it out in the Fight of the Century. You can almost feel the blood coming out of Smokin' Joe's gumshield as Ali lands a punch.

Meanwhile, back towards Pablo Fanque country, the game was on the ropes. Mister Kettle, the referee, was hosting a Wild West Show. Anything that moved out of place, he slung out a card and shot 'em down. Hit twice with a yellow bullet, Jean-Yves M-voto was next to head down the tunnel for an early bath.

'Come on,' Sarah said, 'if you're not watching the sport, you're looking at pictures of it.'

'It's not all sport,' I protested. 'There's Michael Jackson and that's Elton John.' But she was having none of it. Even though Madison Square Garden was primarily a music venue these days, there was far too much of a sporting history for Sarah's liking. So as the game drifted off towards half time and both teams down to ten men, we made our way down Fifth Avenue into Broadway and Time Square. The sun was out now and it was glorious weather for the time of year, even by American standards.

As we reached the advertising hoardings for theatre shows and fast food, the second half kicked off. More free kicks punctuated play as we moved along the streets of Broadway.

'Jesus Christ Superstar might be a good show to watch on Easter Sunday,' I suggested.

We thought about it and looked at the prices as another star illuminated the dull afternoon thousands of miles away. Rhys Wiggins, back to his best, crossed into the box for Yann Kermorgant to head home the opening goal. And that was all it took at the end of the day to claim the three points for the visitors. As we drifted away from Time Square up towards Central Park, the Addicks found themselves pressed against the ropes.

Seventy five minutes into the match, Mister Twelve Cards Kettle swung into action once again. This time Scotty 'The Kid' Wagstaff found himself on the end of a scarlet bullet.

'Good God,' I said when the day was home and we came home at the end of a Manhattan sunset.

'What's wrong?' Sarah asked. 'Did Charlton lose?'

‘No,’ I answered. ‘They won with nine men, and six minutes of injury time.’ The way Chrissie Powell described it in interviews afterwards, it seemed like the match was as monumental as that strange figure of a copper lady on the edge of New York Harbour, with spiked hair and a torch above her head – welcoming tens of thousands of immigrants through Ellis Island.

Reading over the match reports, the closing minutes sounded as if they were straight from a New York Rangers game, a rough and tumble clash played out on ice. But we’d come through, holding our lead at the top of the table with one game less to play.

By the time we faced Walsall on Monday, we’d have got over our jet lag. Charlton though would still be bleeding from Saturday’s wounds, with Scott Wagstaff and Danny Hollands suspended. But we’d go on and win the League that glorious and indelible season, getting promoted a few days after I left New York and crossed over to the other side of America.

PAUL BREEN.