

June 2003 –RN/ IMUSA

Gary Neville is a Red

It seemed appropriate that we were in the Stretford End for this latest visit of one of our favourite Reds, who'd probably be standing on the Stretford End cheering if he wasn't busy playing for the team instead. Except of course that's romantic nonsense, because he'd have to sit down in a sterile Theatre of Dreams like the rest of us. Unfortunately the room we were in was the Executive International Suite, the most potent symbol of how the plc have sold out for the corporate dollar. Execs in the middle of our Stretford End, whose stupid idea was that?

I was helping out on the door where there was a bit of a crush developing with lots of new members signing up and both old and new members being tapped up for raffle tickets and IMUSA merchandise - well, we have to take advantage of what the plc would call an ideal marketing opportunity. Suddenly I recognised a familiar face in the queue and was about to shout hello when realised it wasn't a mate, but Gary waiting patiently to get in. We resisted the temptation to ask to check his membership card and he was escorted to the front.

There had been a bit of a problem with the arrangements. The meeting was widely advertised with a start time of 7.30pm, but on the day United informed IMUSA that Gary was expecting to turn up at 7pm and his plans weren't flexible. IMUSA officers spent a frantic day trying to get the message out, so Gary wouldn't turn up to a half empty room. However, Gary explained he turned up at the time the club told him and cheerfully informed us 7.30 would have been fine by him. Was that Gary being polite or was it United manipulating things for their own reasons? (Not wanting to pay the bar staff overtime springs to mind...) It's been suggested that it may be time we returned to having player meetings at O'Brien's under IMUSA's full control, rather than acting like an extension of the sanitised Supporters' Club branches.

So on to the meeting itself, about which I can tell you absolutely nothing. It's the secret of our success that the players know there is complete confidentiality, so they can speak frankly to the supporters. Gary seemed to relish this freedom to say what he felt instead of the bland soundbites that he usually feeds the seagulls. He answered all the questions openly and usually at some length, often with the same level of passion that he displays on the pitch. It was like sitting in the pub with one of your best mates discussing all things United and agreeing with everything they say. Except this mate was drinking mineral water and looked a hell of a lot fitter than any United fan I've ever met in a pub.

This meeting was less than a fortnight after the city away debacle. Despite the cloak of secrecy I don't think Gary would mind us revealing that he was clearly distressed by his attempt to make the Goat look like George Best and was made up by the hugely supportive reception he was given at the next game.

The evening ended all too soon and Gary seemed almost as disappointed as the rest of us. You felt he'd have liked to wander down to a bar and carry on chatting. He's a top Red who's truly deserving of his hero status. Gary has been our guest at one of these meetings before and IMUSA are delighted that he accepted our invite to return on this occasion. We hope he knows he'll always be welcome.

Many thanks to the club for hosting the meeting and to Paddy Harverson for his usual understated minder role allowing good access to the star of the show. The club were generous with providing the venue and some raffle prizes and despite the confusion over the start time, we are grateful for their help. A particularly nice touch was to give us a pile of posters with the team picture on which kids (and quite a few adults) could get Gary to sign. Another excellent player meeting and we look forward to many more.

Portia Vale