

March 2005 – RN/ IMUSA

IMUSA 10th Anniversary

The Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA) began 10 years ago in April 1995, with a meeting of a dozen people in the Gorse Hill Hotel. The group was formed in order to fight for the rights of match-going fans who were becoming increasingly marginalised by the commercially motivated juggernaut that United was becoming at that time. One of the final catalysts was a particularly crass announcement at a home game against Arsenal for United supporters to remain seated or face ejection. The dirty dozen decided it was time for the supporters to fight back and ensure their collective voice got heard.

When setting up IMUSA, the early pioneers got some useful advice from the established independent supporters associations at West Ham, Newcastle and Chelsea. Ten years later and the ISAs have folded at two of these three clubs, while the third is much less influential than it was. In the meantime, IMUSA has gone from strength to strength and journalists regularly contact IMUSA officers for a fan's view on general football issues as well as United specific items. IMUSA's reputation is going global too, for example Joan Laporta, now the president of Barcelona, consulted IMUSA and then changed his tactics, which probably helped him to win the election at Barca and more recently he has asked IMUSA for advice about TV contracts.

By contrast, in the early days the club had little time for IMUSA and treated the organisation like a bunch of raggy-arsed amateurs. One of the first times the club was forced to acknowledge the good work of IMUSA on behalf of fans was after a campaign to get an extra 5000 tickets for the away game against Porto in 1997. The events in Oporto ended with a very shifty looking Maurice Watkins having to line up alongside Andy Walsh, then IMUSA Chair. A small step on the road to full acceptance and the current slightly thawed relationship between the club and IMUSA.

It could be said that IMUSA came of age during the campaign to stop Rupert Murdoch taking over United in 1998-99. Most of the significant memories of the last 10 years seem to revolve around that fight, the lessons of which are being employed to such good effect in the current fight against Malcolm Glazer. It wasn't all serious though and there are some amusing anecdotes from that period. Like the two IMUSA stalwarts who took the 'Stop Murdoch' banner to the San Siro in 1999. It's a big, heavy banner, but they looked after it carefully all day and even managed to blag their way onto the pitch. After the game they took the banner with them to a bar, but it was in a bit of a mess, so they decided to take it outside to roll it up neatly. While it was spread out on the road, they got rushed by a pack of Inter tifosi, clearly angry at being knocked out of Europe and intent on trouble. Luckily both our IMUSA comrades and the banner survived.

There were many tales of vital contributions to the fight against Murdoch, but maybe one of the best was that of the Leamington Skinhead, who is as scary looking as his nickname sounds (he's a pussycat at heart, but let's not ruin his reputation). After one visit to lobby the Monopolies and Mergers Commission he ended up in a lift with several key personnel. Despite the accompanying smile his fellow lift travellers probably thought twice as the towering skinhead sweetly leant against the buttons and told them they wouldn't be let out of the lift until they agreed to rule against Murdoch's bid. When not being intimidating, his other skill is as a graphic designer, so he was the obvious choice

when IMUSA needed an anti-Murdoch leaflet printed quickly. At one Saturday game he readily agreed to produce a 4000 word, 4-page A4 leaflet. All the 4s should have given a clue to the deadline - 4 days. No sleep, work or family life, but the leaflet was duly produced by Tuesday, in time for the next game.

Nowadays, especially since the emergence of Shareholders United, the concept of the match-going shareholder fan is taken for granted, but in '98 when Murdoch came knocking on our door, IMUSA struggled to find a token shareholder to attend the first press conference at the Stretford Trades and Labour. Eventually they found a willing volunteer to put on a suit and pledge to the assembled press that Murdoch would never get his shares. Somehow I don't think Murdoch would have worried too much about the princely sum of 8 shares, but it's the thought that counts. This same 'shareholder' was later being interviewed outside the Bridgewater Hall in his capacity as vice-chair of IMUSA. He was by then a seasoned interviewee, very used to talking about the anti-Murdoch campaign, so he was full of confidence until the TV guy said "30 seconds until we're live on air". He just had time to scream "You never told me we were live!" before the cameras rolled. He proceeded to gabble what seemed like absolute garbage, heavily dependent on quoting others. Amazingly this rabbit caught in the headlights display was fairly recently shown in a TV programme about the "Men Who Changed Football".

As the anti-Murdoch campaign came to a close, everyone was poised to hear the final ruling, but one of the officers felt obliged to go off on his holidays. He therefore heard the news while tramping the Yorkshire moors with hardly any phone signal and ended up crouching in an unlikely position among the local livestock to improve the reception. We're not sure what the sheep thought of his antics, but perhaps they were grateful to discover he was merely a jubilant United fan and not one of the usual sheep-worriers from places like Leeds.

It's easy to concentrate on the success of the fight against Murdoch, but IMUSA has scored some other notable victories, such as getting compensation for fans who were refused entry to the Stadium of Light for the away match in October 2001. Sunderland had cut our ticket allocation, so many enterprising Reds sorted themselves with tickets in the home sections via the Ticketmaster website. On the day, many were refused entry when they were deemed to be away supporters because they couldn't answer some questions about the home team. Unfortunately Sunderland also turned away many neutral fans (who says you have to support either team to go to a game?) and a fair smattering of their own fans. Eventually IMUSA got Sunderland to agree they were in the wrong and they paid up. I hope they paid their own fans too.

IMUSA continues to fight for supporters' rights and many of the improvements we've seen over the last few years have been at least partly down to the tireless campaigning of IMUSA, including the creation of the singing section in Stretford tier 2 and the loyalty pot for away tickets. Sadly the club's response to IMUSA's efforts aren't always as fan-friendly as we'd like, but with lots of little victories, we can continue to chip away at the barriers that always exist between the Board and the fans.

What better way to end a review of the first 10 years of IMUSA history than with a story by the fans' hero Pat Crerand? When asked for his thoughts on IMUSA he gushed about the fantastic job the organisation does for the fans and then told us he had tried for many years to get Martin Edwards to attend an IMUSA meeting. He claimed he'd

badgered Martin several times and told him he shouldn't underestimate IMUSA because we wouldn't give him a hard time. My stunned expression must have betrayed my inner cynicism, though I'd like to think IMUSA members would be generous enough to give Edwards a fair hearing if he ever has the guts to turn up and speak to us. Paddy persisted with his theme and told tales of how great a United fan Edwards is, very knowledgeable, collects memorabilia etc. He ended by saying I would probably like Martin if I ever met him. Unfortunately I was forced to reply that perhaps I might like him, but possibly not if I was in the ladies loo at the time.

Cheers IMUSA. Thanks for the past 10 years and good luck for many more.

Portia Vale