

March 2002

### Official Ticket Touts

We're used to touting at the game. It's illegal, but we still see the scallies with their stage whispered mantra "Any tickets - buy or sell". Some of us have had to take advantage when all other means of getting a brief have failed. They might be parasites, but perhaps these leeches provide some kind of service.

A different kind of service is available from a different breed of touts. Ticket Agencies will not only sell you a ticket, but a whole package of extras to bump up the price, knowing it's the ticket that really sells the package. United do this and charge up to £200. It's not ideal, but if there are idiots prepared to pay that much on top of a ticket for these tacky extras then United might as well fleece them. I suppose it means there are less general tickets for sale, but if United are making a tidy profit and using this to keep other prices down....oops, sorry, I forgot this is United we're talking about. They're probably making a loss and passing it on to the rest of us.

However, United are not the only ones offering this kind of package, with a ticket for our games. You only have to walk down many High Streets, look in the small ads or surf the Internet, to see agencies advertising tickets for our games. Until recently many of these glorified touts claimed they were official - possibly meaning that they got their tickets off a United director? This season United agreed a deal with one agency, Travelcare, to act as an official supplier of these packages.

Why do United need an agency in competition with their own packages? Why allow someone else to get the profit doing a job you could do yourself? Travelcare, despite the name don't routinely provide travel as part of the package, so their only difference is accommodation. As United part own the hotel across the road (or used to) you wouldn't think booking a hotel was beyond United's wit....oops, sorry, forgot again, this is United we're talking about.

Credit where it's due, at least United have assigned a sole UK and worldwide agency. Or have they? If you pick up a programme (I try not to) you will see a section where United list their "10 Official Short Break Agents", there's actually 11 of them, but we've all dealt with the Ticket Office, so we don't expect United to be able to count. Along with Travelcare there are 5 from Republic of Ireland, 2 each from Norway and Northern Ireland and the other one is from the Isle of Man. How many people live on the Isle of Man? Are they all United fans?

It still leaves the question, if these are the only official agents, where are all the rest getting their tickets? There are plenty of them out there, many of whom use the anonymity of the Internet. I'm not going to name them and give them free publicity, but Red News has a list if the club or the police would like to investigate.

One agency appears to be based in America, but gave an address for a London office (and one in Nice). They offer tickets for 'soccer' games, but helpfully point out that they are "not regular ticket agents". A ticket for our home game against Arsenal would cost you £300. Another one offers tickets for all our remaining home games and states "prices will reflect the market value not necessarily face value". Yet another is offering "tickets for events listed" and simply has a list of our games, stretching back to August.

Do they supply the time machine with the tickets? This company has a website with our club crest on it, but it's the proper one with Football Club on it, so maybe that doesn't break copyright laws now United don't call themselves a football club any longer? And finally a real gem of a company is offering "Corporate hospitality or ticket only" to all our remaining games, including the home fixture with Liverpool on 1<sup>st</sup> April - the April Fools joke being that the match was already played on 22<sup>nd</sup> January. This website has a picture of Giggs and Scholes alongside their blurb - they'll be after image rights.

We asked United to comment and sent them these questions:

1. How many tickets/season tickets have been confiscated this season due to touting?
2. Do United put into process a system where they contact these agents themselves?
3. What is the punishment on anyone found selling tickets on to these agencies?
4. Would United be able to supply a list of the official agencies that are approved to sell tickets with accommodation etc.?

They gave us the following reply:

"All misuse of season tickets and match tickets brought to our attention is investigated and the appropriate action taken. We also have our own (undisclosed) method of investigating potential misuse. Regarding agents, there is a full list of official weekend break agents in every match programme. We do sell hospitality packages on a match-by-match basis, primarily to agents we are comfortable dealing with. If anyone subsequently misuses those packages, we take appropriate action against them. Finally, we don't disclose the number of tickets we confiscate each season."

The answers are ambiguous as usual, but we have to give a vote of thanks to Paddy Harverson for taking the time to give us this reply one evening, because he was away the following week. The abridged reply could have been:

- 1-3. Won't tell you.
4. Buy a programme you tight gets.

You might like a reminder of previous answers from United staff when asked about touting:

It's the police's responsibility.

They're just greedy fans selling on their tickets.

It's no good revoking their membership, they'll re-join under their Mum's name.

We can't just confiscate the season tickets when we have no proof (true, but "John Smith from Stretford", speaking only Japanese or Norwegian is unlikely).

And I like the latest excuse, heard from both Karl Evans and Cuddy Pete recently, that touts are naughty people and they've been threatened by them. Ahhh.

However, we hear on the grapevine that United had a purge on Ebay (the Internet auction site) buying up a load of tickets and punishing the suppliers of tickets. If this is true, why wouldn't the club want to tell us such good news, especially as Ebay have apparently cleaned up their act? When I searched the site the other day for United tickets, the best I could find was a ticket stub from a recent home game for which some sad soul had bid 80p. Whether this improvement has been due to this rumoured United raid, or the sterling work of some Reds who hassled Ebay until they produced a definitive statement for their site detailing the legal implications and stating: "All listings

for football tickets to professional matches involving UK and Ireland teams are prohibited.”

Someone needs to tell the rest of these agencies about the law, or more to the point someone needs to ensure the law is enforced. It can be done. Scotland Yard organised early morning raids on seven ticket offices in London and found dozens of season tickets, mostly for London clubs, but inevitably some were from United. It makes a change from the police’s usual game of arresting an innocent Red trying to get rid of a spare at face value. Over to Greater Manchester Police, maybe working in conjunction with our club, to initiate similar raids. Too much to hope for.

Portia Vale