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### On the pitch, in the stands

After the first couple of months of the season, Manchester United have been faltering a little, Arsenal have been faltering a lot and bookies have decided to give the title to Chelsea already. During that time, nine divisions below the Premiership hype, what's been going on in the North West Counties League Division 2 with FC United of Manchester? While Manchester United were kicking off the season around midday at Everton, FC United were preparing for a 3pm kick off against Leek CSOB (County School Old Boys). On a rain soaked day, we waded in to Leek and the sleepy little town had its first experience of a red army invasion. However, the invaders were only interested in finding pubs showing the Everton v United match and getting some scran. The Unicorn deserves an honourable mention for satisfying both criteria and particularly for serving free hot dogs at half time in the TV game. In fact the whole town was welcoming as they have been at every away game so far. Considering FC United are taking about 2,500 whether home or away, that's not many less than a United away allocation, but the difference in reception from the locals has been incredible.

Closer to home, FCUM fans have been accused of being anti-Manchester United, but if you'd heard the cheer that went up when Ruud scored the first against Everton, you'd know differently. We may have chosen to watch FC, but for most that doesn't mean we've given up on our first love. Instead, we've become like millions of other United fans, watching our team in the pub. Another incident the following week showed the love of United is still ingrained. We'd watched Padiham, then league leaders, being beaten in FCUM's first home game more convincingly than the 3-2 score suggests and headed off to get to know the local pubs around Gigg Lane. Birmingham v City was on the TV, but most weren't paying much attention, until there was a huge cheer and a chorus of the Nicky Butt song, as our former red-shirted hero scored against the bitters. The hatred of City and the respect for ex-United players is deep-rooted within us all.

Conversely, the negative feelings about FC United from some Manchester United supporters seem to be becoming more entrenched, which is sad and will only drive a wedge between two sets of fans who, like it or not, have a common history. I fully understand people saying they can only support one team and FCUM isn't for them, but I can't understand the vitriol. People that I counted as friends as well as virtual strangers, seem to think it's OK to harangue me about what I do with my time while I'm refusing to pay Glazer's debts. It's tough to know that people we've shared so much with, now only want to sling hurtful insults and brand us as traitors, turncoats or bizarrely glory-hunters.

The negativity remains unimportant though, because the fun continues unabated. At the time of writing, FCUM have had 6 wins, a draw and one loss out of 8 league games, with a total of 40 goals scored (29 for and 11 against) and we're having the time of our lives. The sense of community is fantastic, with Board members, players and fans all pulling in the same direction. No more them and us, or love the team, hate the club. Instead if you've got any questions, you can ask a Board member who's standing next to you on the terraces or the ones selling programmes or scarves or even United fanzines. We get consulted on important(?) decisions like the curry club, the design of merchandise and should they put the derby score out over the tannoy? They did announce the derby score, but hardly anyone could hear it as the PA system at Gigg Lane is shite. Those that did hear the announcement of Ruud's leading goal at half time cheered loudly, then sighed heavily on hearing of the

equaliser at full time, that is assuming they hadn't already heard it off one of the dozens of people who were listening to the derby on radios.

The players are good ordinary lads who combine playing part time at non-league level with an assortment of daytime jobs. You can't act like a big time Charlie around the fans when you might be fixing their plumbing next week. They fit their football in around normal lives, so we lost a couple of players during August because they were off on their summer holidays. You can't see Fergie wearing it if Rooney turned up and said "I can't make the next couple of games because Coleen's booked a fortnight in the Costa Brava", but Margy (FC United manager, Karl Marginson) has to grin and bear it.

The players are accessible with about half of them being regular contributors to the internet message board and the whole team always out in the pub with us post-match. In fact the partying gets wilder every week and the players are often to be found leading the singing and making up their own songs about fellow team mates. Recently at an away ground, the non-playing members of the squad were to be found in the social club BEFORE the game too and each one was made to stand on a chair and sing a song, which they cheerfully did, to wild applause of course. You can't help feeling part of it.

There are a sprinkling of players who support other teams, but most of the players are United fans, including one who turned up to the IMUSA EGM in September, because, well, because he always does. FC have got their own David May type City fan and Ole type Liverpool fan. We put up with their football supporting faults and most of the players are coming round to love United too. Both Uniteds that is, because they don't get much choice. Our Liverpoolian winger is getting used to the fact that the preferred chant when he scores a goal is "You Scouse bastard". The other day a Bury fan asked if we could organise a fans' team, because they'd like to arrange a game against us if they could find a pitch. A forumista replied "Our fans' team plays at Gigg Lane!" Nuff said.

Recently the philosophy of players as fans took a new turn when the injured squad members decided to jump in with the fans to watch a game and I mean jump, because they had to climb over a small wall to join the crowd when they first did it at the away game against Castleton Gabriels. Some of the players had tried to do it the previous week at Gigg Lane for the home game against Blackpool Mechanics, (don't you just love the names of these North West Counties League teams?) but the jobsworth stewards wouldn't let them go from the Main Stand to the livelier Manchester Road End, because transfers are not allowed. I doubt that any of them would have tried the old "Don't you know who I am" trick, but even if they did, it would have cut no ice. The fans are struggling hard enough to identify all the players, so the Bury stewards would stand no chance! Finally at the game against Norton United they'd sorted out special dispensation for a transfer between stands, so the pattern has now been set for the players to invade the crowd before every game. Although, the Norton game was FC's first league defeat (lost 2-1 at the same time United were losing 2-1 to Blackburn) so the players might get thrown out of the MRE if they continue to bring bad luck to their team mates on the pitch. But, no matter whether it's ordinary fans, or players acting as fans, the only club rule is 90-90, i.e. 90% of the crowd singing for 90 minutes and so far that's one rule that isn't being broken.

Portia Vale