

Empty seats becoming filled with affection

Article by Matt Dickinson, Chief Sports Correspondent, extracted from *The Times*, Tuesday 4 March 2014

Jackie Wild has already set me off crying when she wells up herself, recalling the night she went with her son Elliot to Anfield. Elliot was not just a Red, she explains, but a fanatical one, so obsessed with his team that when he was picked to play for Everton's development squad, he could not bring himself to pull on the blue shirt.

"He was crying his eyes out saying, 'Mum, I can't wear it,'" Jackie says. "He wouldn't play. I said, 'Right, put your Liverpool shirt on underneath, the Everton one over it and then the Liverpool crest is closest to your heart.' It was the only way I could get him on the pitch."

She asks us to imagine how thrilled such a Liverpool obsessive must have been to go to Anfield, to sit in a box in one of the best seats, and to watch Luis Suárez climb off the bench to score on his home debut against Stoke City.

She invites us to imagine a scene back home that night, Elliot lying in bed, surrounded by the posters of his Kop heroes, beaming like a boy who had just scored the winner in the FA Cup Final. "That was the best night of my life," he smiled.

Life for Elliot could not get any better than that. Within weeks he died of acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. He was nine.

That memory of tucking her son into bed, the face of pure delight, sustains Jackie through the tough days. It is how she remembers her son; not the trauma of chemotherapy, long weeks on hospital wards, the agonising waits for transplants that never happened.

"Three years on, that one memory sticks in my mind: 'the best night of my life,'" she says. And she owes it to a charity set up by Barrie Wells, a millionaire philanthropist who went to bed one night with a problem but woke up with a simple solution. As he puts it, "the best idea I've ever had".

Another Liverpool fanatic, Wells wanted to buy a corporate box at Anfield with friends but was not sure how to fill the seats every week. He worried that a pleasure might become an aggravation.

Then it came to him: why not buy the box and pack it not with occasional friends or business contacts who could take or leave the invite, but people who would be desperate to be there? Why not give those seats to sick and terminally ill children craving some relief, 90 minutes of joy, a day out?

Wells, who has also funded many British Olympians, had not taken up the idea for long at Anfield when



another thought struck him. He would look along the stadium and see half-empty boxes where companies, sponsors, or even players had not bothered to fill their seats.

It was the same wherever he looked, some of the best seats going to waste at football grounds, rugby stadiums. He would see empty boxes even at Wembley and knew that something should be done about it.

So he expanded Box 4 Kids to fill those wasted places, and any boxes anyone wants to donate, with deserving cases. The charity is starting to gain the national momentum it deserves.

Wells contacted the Premier League, which loved the idea, circulating it among the 20 clubs. A few immediately grasped it: Stoke, Fulham and especially Manchester City, who handed over a 20-seat box for one game, arranged VIP access and refused to take a penny even for the half-time sandwiches.

City also contacted all box-holders to inform them that if they were ever going to stay away, there was a long list of sick children eager to step in.

On Sunday, Box 4 Kids went to Wembley, the true home of the prawn sandwich brigade where it sometimes seems that the match is incidental to the three-course lunch.

Alerted to the charity by the FA, Wembley laid on a box for the Capital One Cup final for 20 children and parents, half supporting City and half from Sunderland. There was a teenage City supporter who has had multiple cardiac and plastic surgeries. His parents were so blown away when they received the invitation that they called back to check it was genuine.

Delighting as Fabio Borini scored was Rebecca Burnett, 17, a Sunderland fan for whom this was a rare day out after 18 months battling severe anorexia.

And, no, the final result could not begin to spoil an unforgettable occasion away from the hospitals and the treatments.

Several empty boxes were still detectable at Wembley on Sunday, but this was a start and the charity will be back for England against Denmark tomorrow.

Rugby league has stepped forward to offer tickets. HSBC has offered spare boxes for Disney on Ice.

It costs these companies very little to give up seats that may not be used, or taken up by those for whom it is just another corporate jolly. The upsides are inestimable, as Jackie Wild explains. She so treasured that night with Elliot that she has volunteered to work for the charity.

"My friends ask how I can do it after what happened to Elliot, but there's nothing better than for me to see the kids' faces today," she said at Wembley. "Money can't buy what Barrie is doing."

"These normal families wouldn't in a million years be able to buy this box at Wembley. And they leave with a memory for ever."

Wells has a growing stack of cards from families expressing similar sentiments, but he hopes this is just a beginning.

"The sad fact is we will always have a lot fewer seats than we will have sick children we want to help," he says.