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SYDNEY TAFLER

THE reason Sydney Tafler became a Chelsea fan is there with him in the picture above: his 13-year-old son Jonathan, whose bedroom at their West London home is plastered with Chelsea photographs, pennants, charts, banners . . . blue and white everywhere. Says Sydney: "He's an academic boy really—goes to Latymer, and I hope he makes Cambridge as his elder brother Jeremy did—but since he was about nine my wife (actress Joy Shelton) and I have had a football maniac on our hands.

"I never used to go. For 25 years, Saturday to me meant racing, either going or watching it on the box. Then Jonathan started nagging away at me to go to Chelsea with him and one day, for peace and quiet, I decided to give the horses a miss. By the time I came home from Stamford Bridge that night I was hooked, and have been ever since.

"Mind you, what a fantastic introduction I had, because that was the season Chelsea won the F.A. Cup. I was nearly ill with excitement at Wembley and didn't get to Old Trafford for the replay. When we equalised against Leeds at Wembley so near the end, I looked at Jonathan and he and an old fellow of about 80 were hugging each other with joy.

"They didn't know each other, hadn't met before, and I thought 'What a marvellous thing this football is, that it can bring people together like that.' It was one of the greatest sporting moments of my life.



(Photograph by Jon Lyons)

It's such a pity that the game also brings out the worst in some people—this awful element of vandalism."

Sydney Tafler, London-born, left council school at 14 and got a job in Houndsditch Warehouse at 23/- a week. He had always wanted to act, and some time after leaving school his headmaster arranged for him to enter for a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

In a "field" of 40, young Tafler was first past the post. His certificate said "You have some dramatic ability"—and Sydney was launched on a career of straight, comedy and character acting that has put him on the screen in more than 100 films and 300 TV performances.

One series of "Alexander the Greatest" for ATV has just finished. Another is due to follow soon, but before that you can see him solo as an old violinist (not that you'll recognise him through the make-up) in "Farewell Performance", in BBC TV's "Thirty Minute Theatre".

Back to football, today's match will stretch family ties almost to breaking point, because brother-in-law film director Lewis Gilbert is a rabid Arsenal supporter. Of the new stadium now being planned at Stamford Bridge, Sydney says: "I hope Chelsea provide the equivalent of a members' enclosure at racing, where you can get a meal before the match and a drink in comfort at half-time.

"Car-parking facilities, too. What a performance I go through at big matches like today's, I start by driving here before midday, to get parked nearby for after the game. Then I take a taxi home to have lunch and another one back here for the game.

"I know it sounds mad . . . but we're a Chelsea-mad family. Our three 'seasons' in the West Stand are always taken. If Jeremy doesn't come, we bring Joy. She's first reserve! I suppose, on balance, I'm saving money, not going racing now on Saturdays. You could say the horses are paying for our season-tickets."