

**TT No.192: Mike Latham** - Fri 30 March 2007: Tyreman East of Scotland League First Division. **Gala Fairydean** 3-3 Peebles. Attendance: 250 (headcount); Admission: £4; 20pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4\*.

Gala Fairydean is one of the most famous names in Scottish non-league circles and a visit there had been high on my list for many years. Last season I got as far as the club bar having travelled four hours in wintry conditions having been assured the game was on only to have the referee call it off 15 minutes before kick-off due to a frosty pitch.

At least on a dry, sunny but chilly afternoon there were no such problems this time though a precautionary telephone call to the secretary was deemed necessary- one bitten, twice shy.

Gala were formed in 1907 and work is on-going on a club history to mark the centenary. Though the Borders area is rugby dominated there is a decent standard of soccer in these parts and the demise of the Border Reivers professional team from the end of this season, based next door, can only help that cause.

Five times league champions in the 1960s and having had another successful era in the 1980s Gala have fallen on hard times recently though there is much determination to mount a serious attempt at regaining past glories. A general public meeting was called early last year to revive the club and a new management team appointed with the emphasis on local players rather than those based in Edinburgh. The youth set-up was also encouraged with the aim of boosting interest in the club again.

Though Gala will again miss out on promotion this season the signs are promising. A week before this game the town's most famous footballer, John Collins, now manager of Hibs, brought an under-19s team to play a friendly game. The attendance of 1,500 was 300 higher than for the Magners League encounter between the ill-fated Reivers and Edinburgh next door. Collins donned the black and white stripes and celebrated with a goal though Hibs prevailed 3-2 and the Hibs boys paraded the Scottish League Cup.

Gala used this game as an experiment for Friday night football and the response was again encouraging. They had a schoolboys' exhibition game on before the main game and a girls' football game at half-time and the crowd of around 250 created a good atmosphere and sense of occasion.

The Netherdale complex is at the lowest part of the town, on a river flood plain, with the rugby ground next door. The ground's main feature is a concrete cantilevered main stand, seating 500, that was opened in 1964. This stand was controversially, in 2006, given a B listing by Historic Scotland which means 'its character and setting must be preserved for future generations.' Critics labelled the stand as something akin to the 1960s Soviet Union and were hardly appeased

when a far more historic sandstone building in the town was demolished to make way for a supermarket.

Like it or lump it- and opinion among the people I spoke to was divided- the stand is here to stay. Housing the club bar, offices and dressing rooms underneath it does present an excellent view of play though its outside appearance is not easy on the eye.

The rest of the ground is open standing on grass banks with views of rugby and football pitches stretching into the distance.

Sadly, games in the first division of the East of Scotland League do not have proper linesmen- just a club official, one from each club to signal if the ball has gone out. So, the referee, who has to rule on offsides, deal with substitutions and injuries and the myriad of other things that crop up during a game, has a thankless task.

The players, to their credit, do not attempt to take advantage of this situation though they understandably became increasingly irate after a number of marginal offside decisions were wrongly called- from the benefit of my eerie in the stand. As a result, the frustrations grew and a competitive game incurred far too many yellow cards than it warranted.

Taking a 2-0 half-time lead by two late first-half goals and then 3-1 just after the hour-mark the visitors appeared well in control. But they lost two players to second yellow cards late in the game and Gala staged a fight-back to claim a 3-3 draw in a game generally played in a good spirit.

Hopefully Gala will stage more Friday night games which will increase support and interest in a rugby-dominated community and attract more groundhoppers, too as well as regaining their place in the Premier Division. The First Division has only eleven clubs and, even allowing for the wet winter weather that can decimate football up here between December and March, 20 league games is far too few to maintain interest.

A rudimentary 20-page programme complimented an interesting evening and a tea bar sold hot drinks and pies. Club officials were welcoming to a stranger and the feeling here is what could have been achieved had Gala's application to the Scottish League in 1994 been accepted above Ross Co and Inverness Caley. But this is definitely a club on the up and maybe the goal of league football can be attained- surely a necessary thing if the round-ball game is to challenge the oval ball game in the Borders.

The 60-mile journey back to the M6 along the A7 is not the easiest on darkened roads but the game and the occasion had made this an enjoyable evening and definitely a case of second time lucky.

06/20