

**TT No.216: Mike Latham** - Tuesday 10 April 2007: Westmorland League Division One. **Coniston 2-2 Ibis**. Attendance: 20; No admission price or programme; FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

The day after Easter and many of the tourists that have blocked the Lakeland roads for four solid days have departed leaving the beautiful scenery to the locals and a few straggling tourists. The journey from J36 of the M6 through Windermere and Ambleside (home of Stuart Clarke's Homes of Football gallery - a 'must see') is a straightforward one and the winding road down to Coniston negotiated easily in time for the 6-30pm kick-off on an overcast evening.

Coniston's ground is to be found as part of the Sports & Social club in the village, located at Shepherd's Bridge, just off the road to Ambleside. With a modern social club, bar and dressing rooms and a big car-park the ground is one of the best appointed in the Westmorland League. Spectator viewing is available on the veranda of the social club should the weather turn nasty with the rest of the ground open standing. Behind the near-side goal stands the impressive mist-topped Coniston Old Man, a major landmark in the National Park, while an all-weather soccer court has also been constructed on the complex.

The glorious views from the ground more than compensate for the standard of the football. Not that this is a bad game. Kendal-based Ibis, desperate for at least a draw to escape the lower reaches of the table, belie their lowly standing with a battling display while the home side, in mid-table, have two front men who are especially impressive. Play is hard but sporting and well-contested and the referee, a rather mature gentleman of comfortable build, controls the game expertly from an armchair in the centre circle.

The home side twice take the lead, their second goal with a few minutes remaining seemingly guaranteeing victory. But Ibis show great character to equalise as dusk descends to earn a deserved share of the spoils.

The attendance at the start numbers three, but grows to around the 20-mark by midway through the first-half. Again, as seems to be the norm in this league, there are no programmes and no-one takes an admission fee or goes around with raffle tickets. How do these clubs fund themselves?

But there are compensations besides the glorious scenery. The standard of the football, though often rudimentary, is highly watch-able and the players generally behave themselves without the routine swearing and abuse of match officials that has become the norm in higher leagues. They are playing for the love of the game and have a respect for the game's traditions and their opponents. That is shown when a Coniston goal is disallowed in the first-half for the striker knocking the ball from the grasp of the visiting goal-keeper before putting the ball in the net. 'Terrific decision. referee,' shouts the home manager, without a hint of sarcasm. It is genuine praise for the official.

Coniston is a small village in the south Lakes that originally derived its income from farming and now is a major tourism centre. Donald Campbell died here in 1967 attempting to improve his world land speed record on Coniston Water. His ill-fated boat, Bluebird, is remembered as the name of the prize-winning bitter of the Coniston Brewing Company, and a visit to the brewery tap, the Black Bull, is a must before the journey home. As ever, it doesn't disappoint and, again, the Westmorland League comes up trumps - go with low expectations and prepare to be surprised.

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