

**TT No.89: Mike Latham** - Fri 8 Dec 2006. Welsh Premier League: **Welshpool Town** 4-2 NEWI Cefn Druids. Attendance: 228; Admission: £5; 32pp programme: £1.50; FGIF Match Rating: 4\*.

After a week of heavy rain my friend Rupert chose to stay locked in his busy city legal practice clocking up his chargeable hours rather than risk a postponement at one of only two games to be staged in the country, the other being even further distant from London, in Caernarfon.

At first, I thought that Rupert, who is rarely wrong, might have proved his impeccable judgement again. A mid-afternoon telephone call to the club number listed on the WPL website reached the Welshpool bowling club and the man who answered the 'phone was not exactly helpful over the prospects of play that evening. The secretary listed in Bill Berry's contacts book for 2006/07 is also out of date so, rather than risk a 200-mile round-trip to mid Wales to no avail, I decided to do what I should have done in the first place- phone Rupert.

Now Rupert is a busy man but always takes time out for his friends. Looking up from his mounting pile of paperwork he came up with a masterly suggestion: telephone the away club secretary. Within moments he was proved right again- a most helpful gentleman from the Druids assured me the game was on and off I set down rain drenched motorways and then down the A483 past Wrexham into border country.

BBC Radio 5Live perform an excellent service to road users if you live near Rupert. But the fact that the A483 was completely blocked by a swollen river and flooding just north of Welshpool brought not a single reference on the bulletins I heard. No matter, a few diversions later and soon the floodlights of the Maesydre were in view, just behind the railway station.

At first the evening began badly with the Morrisons and Somerfield's supermarkets in the town having run out of sandwiches and the petrol station rendered useless for a brief spell by a technical fault. And, hands smelling of diesel when I eventually filled up (no plastic gloves being available) any hopes of a good wash at the Maesydre soon disappeared. The toilets at the ground, in a small brick building behind the stand, are the filthiest I have ever seen and have no running water.

The Welshpool ground, shared with the town's cricket, rugby and bowling clubs, is rudimentary at best and God alone knows how it will fare when the WPL bring in their much-trumpeted new regulations. One can imagine a blazered official walking around armed with a clipboard and a checklist, tut-tutting as he goes.

But it does have a basic charm and the evening did get better. Despite the sodden ground and the overflowing rivers all along the A483 from Oswestry the pitch, though heavy and undulating, was perfectly playable, even though the surface was

worlds away from the immaculate bowling green-type playing area I had seen at Skelmersdale's new ground three days earlier.

The Welshpool ground has a small main stand, which provides the only cover. The rest of the ground is flat standing. On the far side the pitch almost encroaches on the cricket square and a post and rail fence has been erected to make for an enclosed ground while a scaffolded platform for the use of television cameras is another feature.

A friend of mine has a claim to fame- that he once played county rugby union. Impressive at first sound, but less so when you learn that the county was Montgomeryshire and that there are only two teams in the county. When the rival open side prop was injured my friend, propping for Welshpool, was a shoe-in. I thought of him as I surveyed the scene, looking beyond the cricket square to the rugby posts beyond.

With most of the crowd gathering on the main stand side, where the changing pavilion is also located and a tea hut and club shop did brisk business (the home-made soup comes highly recommended) I chose to watch a highly competitive game from the far side, standing on a wooden board next to the cricket square.

I do enjoy the WPL. The standard of play is good, I find, with teams trying to play football and certainly giving everything. Being so close to the action it was instructive to hear the bone-crunching challenges and the incredible level of abuse handed out to the referee and linesmen by the players- it would simply not be tolerated in rugby league. This was football in the raw, a world away from the glitz and glamour of the English Premiership.

I had bought a Golden Goal ticket on the way in- but surely a swear box might be a better way of raising funds for Welshpool, who are easily the most foul-mouthed team I have heard this season, with an "F" word regularly peppering the night sky. Quite what the families who had brought their sons and daughters to the game thought of it I don't know. It was hard to discern and the spectators, mostly well dressed and polite (just like Rupert) watched in almost total silence, the goals being greeted with little more than quiet applause.

I had seen Cefn Druids beat Caernarfon 3-2 the previous Friday evening and had been impressed. They carried on their recent good form by taking a 2-0 half-time lead. But Welshpool fought back in stirring fashion, scoring four second half goals to continue their push for a top-four finish. All the goals were at the end bordering the A483 and the elderly couple who parked their car by the corner flag and watched the action from the warmth of their vehicle certainly had a good evening's entertainment.

This was a hugely entertaining game, albeit on a cold night as the temperature plummeted and icy rain began to fall late in the game. Every player on view gave his all, the commitment was huge and they attempted to play constructively impressive despite the cloying surface. A former Welshpool player, Gary Roberts, is now playing for Ipswich Town on loan from Accrington Stanley and is tipped for a

move to the Premiership. Interviewed recently, he spoke of his admiration for the skill level of players in the WPL. I thought of his words as I watched a compelling game.

The journey home, on darkened, flooded roads was a treacherous one but the game had been well worth the trouble. I phoned Rupert, filing his last file in his city office before he headed for home, via a quick snifter at the Guards Club. He had clocked up over a thousand pounds of chargeable time while I had been out and about to Welshpool but it was me that felt the richer.

06/20