

TT No. 155: Andrew Gallon - Sat 29th December 2007; **Sutton Town AFC v Calverton MW**; CML Premier Division; Res: 5-4; Att: 80 (h/c); Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

Perhaps Sutton Town AFC joint manager Danny Bryant should go into the fortune telling business. His programme notes for this top-of-the-table clash (sixth versus third before play) ended with him predicting: "I can promise everyone that this game will have everything." As I read these words, the players were attempting a meaningful pre-match warm-up in the teeth of a roaring gale. It wasn't raining but a clear sky was starting to cloud over and downpours had been forecast. Driving down the M1, I'd picked up Five Live's gloomy synopsis of a dire first half between Sheffield United and Crystal Palace at nearby Bramall Lane. There was much moaning about the conditions not helping two poor teams supply a spectacle. So I wasn't expecting much. You need decent weather for a decent game of football, right? Wrong!

This end-to-end thriller would have been a superb match in perfect weather. That it was so exciting amid an elemental conflagration (the torrential rain arrived just as the first half was drawing to a close) speaks volumes for the skill and commitment of both sides. Calverton went ahead in the 10th minute when Craig Boulton converted a well-struck penalty following a foul on Ben Middleton. A delightful reply got Sutton level in the 26th minute. Dave Barrie's fancy footwork in midfield ended with a throughball which was stepped over by Kyle Ludlow and Carl Longmore raced away to poke a shot under the advancing Lance Walker. Three minutes later, the visitors were back in front. Warren Hatfield knocked down a ball in and Middleton fired a low drive across John Styring and into the far bottom corner. Ten minutes before the break, Calverton failed to clear on the edge of their box and James Senior thumped a firm effort past a static Walker - a goal from the moment ball left boot.

My second incorrect prediction of the day was for a goalless second half. How many times do you see a flood of goals in the first half and then nothing after that? I was proved wrong within three minutes of the restart. Stu Morris crossed from the right touchline and an unmarked Middleton guided a downward header past an exposed Styring. Undeterred, the Snipes equalised in the 54th minute. A free-kick fell to Danny O'Donnell 16 yards out and he hooked a tremendous volley into the net off the underside of the crossbar. The next goal was always going to be important - and Sutton got two in three minutes. O'Donnell got to the ball before Walker on the left side of the box and poked it past the keeper for Senior (63) to tap into an empty net before O'Donnell (66) cracked a sublime 20-yarder into the top corner. Back came Calverton and with 76 minutes on the clock (my stop watch, to be absolutely precise) Sutton failed to deal with a deep cross, which fell to an unmarked Dave Harlon at the back post. He lashed the ball into the roof of the net to set up an appropriately storming finish in which the visitors could not quite

manage another goal for a 5-5 draw which would have equalled my all-time best aggregate score. Phew! Bizarrely, Calverton's previous game, at Yorkshire Main on December 22, had also ended in a 5-4 defeat. What odds would you have got on a repeat?

Football in Sutton-in-Ashfield has had a chequered history and the present club, the post-1997 successors to Sutton Town and Ashfield United, play on the edge of town near Huthwaite. They came to The Fieldings as North Notts, changed their name to Sutton Town and climbed up into the Northern Counties (East) League. Financial problems led to the club dropping three levels in the pyramid and re-emerging last summer as Sutton Town AFC in the Premier Division of the Central Midlands League. The Snipes had a major wobble soon after this season kicked off but have come through it with a change of manager and a number of comings and goings in playing personnel. Happily, they seem to be prospering now and may well win promotion if recent results and this performance are anything to go by.

The Fieldings, to my eyes at least, is a rather appealing ground. It is of NCEL standard, and so considerably better than is customary in the CML's basement division. Access is down a hard-to-spot narrow road between the Clarence House nursing home and an estate of new builds which has sprouted apparently uncontrollably since the club first arrived here. To the left is the ground of Nottinghamshire Premier Leaguers Mansfield Hosiery Mills cricket club; to the right the football ground. The road ends in a small car park behind a well-appointed, modern social club which serves both sports. The neat turnstile block brings you out on the halfway line. To the left are sections of basic cover (flat metal sheeting held up by scaffolding poles) over two areas of shallow terracing and three rows of wooden tip-up seats. The dressing rooms are housed in one of the portable buildings to the rear, with the players accessing the pitch via a 'tunnel' created by gates which swing back and lock when not in use. Other portable buildings alongside the dressing rooms contain the toilets, club shop and a refreshment area. In the bottom left-hand corner is yet another portable building rather nicely converted as a boardroom, with a PA announcer's cabin at one end. The tannoy remained resolutely silent throughout but if you seek out committee member Stewart Lee, he'll give you the line-ups - and save a programme for you if you're planning a last-minute arrival.

Next to the boardroom, and filling in the area between the corner flag and the bottom end goal, is a kit stand with four rows of seats in the club's claret and sky-blue colours. From here, you'll notice the pitch's considerable slope up to the top goal. The rest of the ground is open hardstanding. This comprises a path scarcely more than a metre wide. The Fieldings feels enclosed because of the high mesh fencing which surrounds it on all but the cricket ground side and the proximity of the new houses. The dugouts, again very tidy, are either side of the halfway line opposite the turnstile. To the left of the dugouts is a single step - the only uncovered terracing in the ground. From here, you can see the land falling away beyond the ground in the Nottingham direction. There are floodlights, also unusual for the CML Premier. The system boasts three masts per side, with two lamps on

each. A concrete panel fence, painted white, surrounds the pitch. There are 'kinks', painted claret, to accommodate the goal nets - another indicator of the severe constraints of this exceptionally cramped site.

I imagine Sutton Town AFC would, at the very least, like to win back a place in the Northern Counties (East) League. They are, relatively speaking, a well-supported club and probably have the potential to get into the UniBond League. But, The Fieldings itself may prove their biggest handicap. There is simply no room to expand at any point and the presence of the housing estate could also become a problem. People have a habit of buying houses on the cheap next to football grounds - and then start complaining about the disruption! If nothing else, the Snipes are hardy survivors, so I wouldn't discount them from clambering back up the pyramid. I wonder what soothsayer Danny Bryant sees in his crystal ball?

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