

TT No. 160: Mike Latham - New Year's Day, Tuesday 1 January 2008: Midland Combination Premier Division. **Southam United** 1-1 Highgate United. Att: 118; Admission: £4 (incl. 12pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

There are precious few opportunities to see the top two teams in a league in opposition over the course of a season and particularly so on a new ground. So, this opportunity to watch a '2 versus 1' clash in the Midland Combination Premier Division game (level six of the pyramid), particularly as it tied in with the 7-45pm kick-off kindly arranged by Oadby Town for later in the day, was eagerly accepted.

Southam is a small market town in Warwickshire, situated about 13 miles south of Coventry on the Banbury road. The town's modest football ground is to be found just south of the town on the right-hand-side just after a petrol garage. There is a decent-sized car park and the football pitch can be seen through the metal exterior fence that surrounds the ground.

The land is all pretty flat around here and the scenery is nothing to write home about- a small industrial estate and the town to the north and open countryside to the south. The ground has a small cover that runs from roughly the nearside corner flag to the halfway line on the nearside touchline that runs parallel to the Banbury Road. Behind the goal to the north is a clubhouse that is also shared with the adjoining bowling club.

Southam's seated stand suffered severe damage in a storm in early December and the structure currently lies forlornly in two pieces on the far side of the ground while the club awaits instructions from their insurers. The rest of the ground is standing behind a post and rail fence.

The club official manning the gate was friendly and explained the programme was free with the admission price. He was expecting a close and entertaining game between the two top sides and explained that both sides had a healthy respect for one another. Thoughtfully, an up-to-date league table had been inserted into the programme that gave the tables up to the previous Saturday's games. Arriving early, I got chatting to one of the opposition's officials who was also keenly anticipating the game. So, the portents looked good.

The clubhouse incorporates a small bar and tea room that was doing brisk business on a chilly, dark but dry afternoon and the locals were friendly. Southam run many junior sides and several youngsters were helping out as ball-boys during the game, smartly clad in the club tracksuits.

The pitch, though undulating in parts was well grassed and in good condition and the game was a highly entertaining one, played in a good spirit. The goals came early, Southam taking a 15th minute lead thanks to a goal-keeping error but the visitors replying two minutes later in bizarre circumstances. After a long ball out of defence the Highgate striker appeared to be fouled and the referee's whistle could

clearly be heard. The home defenders and goalkeeper stopped, the Highgate player carried on, lobbing the ball over the 'keeper and into the net. To everyone's amazement the referee signalled a goal.

To their huge credit the Southam players took this decision remarkably well. There are a few ill-disciplined sides I've watched lately that would have gone apoplectic but after some discussions they simply got on with the game. Despite chances at both ends that's how the score-line was to finish though the Highgate centre-half rattled the crossbar late in the game.

The attendance of 118 was, I was told, the second highest in the league this season. Highgate remained four points clear at the top though having played a game more than their opponents. Based on the evidence of this game, the title chase may well go until the end of the season because the sides looked well-matched and capable of stepping up a level.

A visit to this friendly club comes highly recommended.

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