

TT No.70: Andrew Gallon - Sat 29th September 2007; **Phoenix S&SC** v Ollerton T; Central Midlands Premier; Res: 0-6; Att: 41 (h/c); Admission: £2; Programme: 50p (16pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

We've all been there. You wait weeks for something and then discover all the fun was in the anticipation. Phoenix Sports & Social Club must be feeling like this about their long-awaited home debut in the Premier Division of the Central Midlands League. Since the season began, way back on August 11, they've had to play every single game away because of the overrunning fixtures of their flood-hit cricketing neighbours. Finally, the big day arrives and - crash, bang, wallop - they get hammered.

It was a bit of a pasting, too. Ollerton Town, one of the more progressive clubs in the division, showed just why they are near the top of the table by handing out a lesson which, in footballing terms, bordered on a university professor lecturing the remedial class. The visitors were sharper, slicker, more cogent and infinitely more creative. On the few occasions Phoenix did get a sniff of goal, keeper Neil McClafferty proved an immovable object blocking their path. Shame, really. Rather like turning up at the church to get married only to discover your bride has run off with the vicar.

We (regular CML hoppers were out in force) had a taste of things to come in the 14th minute when Phoenix skipper Adam Travis had to race back to hook a Lee Wilson lob off the goal-line. He was soon left wondering why he'd bothered expending so much energy because, 60 seconds later, his defenders deserted their posts to allow Gary Panting to shin in a corner via prone keeper Lee Fuller and an upright. Just to show footballers struggle to learn from their mistakes, the predatory Panting repeated the dose six minutes after the break, crashing home a volley after Wilson's corner had picked him out unmarked again.

Phoenix's Aaron Hatfield then got clean through twice - and both times sliced shots embarrassingly wide. Sunday league stuff. Wilson (62) showed him how it should be done by finding the roof of the net from close range after more work at the back akin to a security guard kipping on night duty. Lee Hill, a Peter Crouch lookalike on a short fuse who lost his temper almost as many times as strike partner Tom Daniels lost possession, was twice denied brilliantly by the indestructible McClafferty before home keeper Fuller came up with a couple of blinders of his own. Fuller, oddly, was rather less impressive when Tony Buchanan stroked in a sweet 20-yarder (72) and then flighted a free-kick into the top corner (75) from the same area on the other side of the pitch. Wilson rubbed in a handful of salt with a glancing header nine minutes from time to leave the Phoenix lads looking distinctly demoralised.

So, what of the facilities? Phoenix, a merger of two former Sheffield County Senior League teams, play in Brinsworth, a surprisingly verdant location deep in the boiler

room that is South Yorkshire. Rather like finding an orchid on a dung heap. A pleasant estate of new homes (I sense the overused adjective 'executive' straining at the leash) is the precursor to a large tarmac car park. To the left, football pitches stretch away, ahead is the Brinsworth Pavilion (it's a pub catering for the keg beer and scampi and chips brigade), to the right the troublesome cricket pitch and, beyond that, shimmering as enticingly as Omar Sharif's big entrance in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, is the Phoenix ground perched on a shelf of land.

The pavilion, a grand affair of red brick and multi-angled roofs, houses the dressing rooms in its east wing, obliging the players to make their way across a corner of the cricket pitch to reach their stage. A long, wooden building - inside, as homely and ramshackle as a scout hut - supplies refreshments and, having paid at a table, you walk through the bare frame of a cricket net to the near halfway line. The only cover, a low, deep stand (rather like a garage) fashioned from metal sheeting and daubed in graffiti, shelters a slab of earth. To the left is a strip of tarmac - the only drop of hard stuff in the ground; the remainder is grass. The excellent pitch is railed off, with kinks at each end to accommodate the goals in the style of (and allow me a flight of fancy here) Goodison Park in the 1960s.

Beyond the grass at the left-hand end are two bands of mature trees, a golf course and, as the valley drops away, ranks of factories which, even on a Saturday afternoon, hum mysteriously. Temporary dugouts are located amidships on the opposite side, with a broad area of grass and a red-brick wall backing on to more fairways, another portion of the valley and a hillside covered attractively with trees. It's really rather nice, especially with autumn's colours beginning to dazzle in the milky sunlight. Before anyone gets the idea this a beauty spot to rival those in the nearby Peak District, perhaps I should mention the bottom end of the ground is dominated by hulking pylons carrying electricity cables towards Rotherham. Behind the right-end goal is more grass and, to the rear of a concrete panel fence, the housing estate. Another ground where the constituent elements, not terribly exciting when taken in isolation, blend to form a thoroughly pleasing whole. Now all Phoenix have to do is sort out the displeasing holes in their defence and, with a glut of home fixtures to come, perhaps they can rise up the league.

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