

TT No.91: Andrew Gallon - Wed 17th October 2007; **Newcastle Blue Star v Bradford PA**; UniBond Challenge Cup Rd 2; Res: 2-1 (aet); Att: 73; Admission: £5; Programme: £2 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Most marriages involving football and rugby clubs (of either code) seem to end in messy divorce. Even those which make it beyond the honeymoon period are often blighted by backstabbing and bickering, so it'll be interesting to see how long Newcastle Falcons RUFC and Newcastle Blue Star AFC remain contented bedfellows at Kingston Park. It appears an unlikely relationship. The Falcons are one of the biggest clubs in the UK in their sport with a stadium capable of holding 10,000 while Blue Star, though well known in the North East, are small fry in a national football context. Never well supported when based at cut-off Woolsington, Blue Star, formed in 1930, took a huge gamble this season by leaving the parochial Northern League to help make up the numbers in the new UniBond League Division One North. Durham City and Consett considered joining them in the venture until, presumably, they realised the sums simply didn't add up. All that extra travelling, and barely increased crowds, is a recipe for financial disaster - as the likes of Whitley Bay, Bishop Auckland and Spennymoor United discovered in recent years when they kissed goodbye to the comforting embrace of the Northern League.

Blue Star's story is a little different. Their old ground, The Wheatsheaf, was bought in the summer by the rugby union club, who are redeveloping it as a training centre for their squad of professionals. Part of the deal allowed for the footballers to share Kingston Park with the Falcons, who began life as Gosforth and bought what was the Chronicle and Journal Sports Ground for just £55,000 in 1989 having sold their own on North Road to a housing developer for £1.7m. This Blue Star cup tie with Bradford (Park Avenue) attracted some way less than 100 spectators, including a decent away following from West Yorkshire. It doesn't bode well for the future, though Tommy Cassidy must have faith. Six weeks ago, the Geordie swapped a secure job at Workington, where over a number of years he had worked miracles on a shoestring, to take on the Blue Star manager's role. He arrived spouting the usual platitudes about potential but, with many of the players put under contract by his predecessor, it's going to be a while before he can build up a team of his own.

Kingston Park is located on the north-western extremity of Newcastle, close to the airport - which speaks volumes for its isolation. If nothing else, it's handy for the A1. The stadium betrays its piecemeal development over the last 18 years, with the relatively new, swish west and south stands at odds, in design terms, with the rather dowdy remainder. The east stand is the original and its modest scale indicates how limited were the early ambitions of the rugby union club in the days before satellite television's money transformed the 'kick and clap' code. It's a small cantilever, about 50 yards in length, with just six rows of green and white plastic tip-up seats. There is a narrow, exposed concourse at the back and behind that a

bar, where Blue Star match tickets, programmes and hideously overpriced refreshments can be bought. Take a flask and your own food. An ugly, brick-built block of clashing roof angles and 'hotch-potch' styling is bolted on to the rear (as a barnacle to a whelk) and houses dressing rooms, hospitality, souvenir shop, ticket office and administration. Modern Perspex dugouts are positioned in front of the stand on a wide area of tarmac. There is a central players' tunnel. Either side, the land is a mess and unused by spectators.

To the right, the north stand is an uncovered terrace with bulky white crush barriers. An electronic scoreboard, definitely first generation, tops the blank rear wall. Behind is a rugby pitch. The new south and west stands are large cantilevers, with the sort of deep side screens which give them the appearance of a kitchen bin turned on its side. At least they'll keep out the wind which is notorious in these latitudes. The design concept is scarcely more inspiring than something you'd get from Addis. It's all breeze block, concrete, metal and straight lines, crying out for a sign or a logo to lend some individuality. The rear of the west stand, which contains serried ranks of (appropriately) grey plastic tip-up seats, looks more like a motel than a sports stadium and, tellingly, features a revolving door giving access to an Italian restaurant. Not haute cuisine, though, judging by the menu. The south stand has terracing, again with substantial white crush barriers. The one curiosity of the two stands is the large, dimpled panels used in the side screens. A television studio perches in the north-west corner. The floodlights are, on the east side, masts and, on the west, roof fascia-mounted lamps. There is, as you'd expect in such a remote spot, plenty of parking. Some 500 spaces - everywhere but to the north - are provided, and that's more than Blue Star will need for a whole season of fixtures. Flat fields bound Kingston Park, save for to the south, where a bland estate of modern houses fills in the blanks on the other side of Brunton Road. Viewed holistically, this is another ground at which function has been put before form and not a penny, bonny lad, wasted on aesthetics. Pity. Where I grew up, they'd say it was neither 'nowt nor summat'.

So, an empty, unappealing stadium meant a decent game was badly needed to compensate - and, thankfully, we got one. This was an end-to-end cup tie between two committed teams, packed with goalmouth incident and had the bonus of extra-time which gave a value-for-money feeling the disappointing programme certainly did not. Avenue didn't arrive until 1915, so kick-off was put back 15 minutes to 2000. Hardly welcome news on a chilly evening. But it was Blue Star who were caught cold, tricky Avenue winger Chris Gahgan capitalising on dozy defending and a fortuitous ricochet to race clear and slam a low shot past Craig Summersgill. Just 25 seconds on the clock. The home team went on to dominate the first half but John Worsnop's saves and desperate goal-line clearances restricted the Tynesiders to Leon Scott's 25th-minute equaliser. The left-back lashed in an angled drive after Avenue (lovely to see them in their traditional red, amber and black hoops) had failed miserably to clear their lines.

Avenue, an outfit who also know a thing or two about ground-sharing with rugby clubs, were a different proposition after the break. They got on top steadily but as

chance after chance went begging extra-time started to look as inevitable as the plunge taken by the thermometer mercury. Skipper Ross Clegg and substitute Ben Jones went agonisingly close for the visitors in the opening minutes of extra-time before Blue Star nicked it in the 108th minute when Ben Pringle's 16-yard shot cannoned off the inside of a post and was bundled over the line from close range by beanpole striker Phil Bell. Only Bell could say how much he knew about the winner, though judging by the number of times he strayed offside during the game my guess would be precious little. It was harsh on Avenue, whose players, officials and fans faced a very late hour to bed in addition to the usual agony of defeat a long way from home.

A Blue Star game at Kingston Park is hardly one of world football's great experiences but I'd suggest it would be one to 'tick off' sooner rather than later. I just can't see this relationship going the distance.

06/20