

**TT No.97: Andrew Gallon** - Tues 23rd October 2007; **Retford United** v Carlton Town; UniBond Division One South; Res: 2-0; Att: 163; Admission: £6; Programme: £1.50 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*.

Nondescript town, nondescript ground and a largely nondescript game. Bob the Badger, Retford's shrinking violet mascot, seemed a bit down about it all - unless this week's news of a threatened cull of his species had provoked clinical depression. Mascots, whom I generally suspect to be introverts (or worse) using disguise to throw off temporarily the shackles of their diffidence, are meant to look lively. But Bob contented himself with padding quietly round the spectator side of the pitch railing in the company of a close-cropped chap who could have passed as a minder. Retford's regulars include a couple of attention seekers with drums and bugle. I'd gladly spare the badger and settle for having the so-called band shot.

Maybe boredom, rather than fear, was at the bottom of Bob's lassitude for this was a dull spectacle on a cold night. Retford, top of the table, barely had to extend themselves to dispose of a Carlton team who competed gamely but lacked any goal threat. The first half passed almost entirely without incident. Most of the entertainment was provided by the ludicrous posturing of the be-gloved jester in the home technical area. Sit down, shut up.

The three chances of the opening 45 minutes all fell to Retford's Neil Harvey, who was denied by exotically named goalkeeper Alessandro Barcherini the first time and was narrowly off target with the others. It got a little

better after the break. Barcherini blocked superbly with his legs to thwart handy striker Michael Godber but moments later was beaten twice in 60 seconds. Greg Wright (52) bundled in a corner from close range and Harvey (53), looking yards offside, ran on to a sweet Godber pass for a coolly-taken second.

Fabian Smith fluffed Carlton's sole opportunity, shooting tamely at Neil Murray after Steve Chaplin had set him up perfectly - and the culprit was then promptly substituted. It meant a long last half-hour, with midfield

rutting punctuated by occasional moments of excitement in the vicinity of the Millers goal. Steven Owen and Godber went close for the Badgers but found Barcherini a resolute obstacle. Still, anything wider than a two-goal

victory margin would have been harsh on Carlton, who need to find some inspiration to match their industry.

Don't waste your time exploring Retford. It's awful; made more so at tea-time by foulmouthed gangs of teenagers on every street corner. What are the parents up to? The Square, containing the town hall, could be pleasant but is merely scruffy. King's Park, through which flows the River Idle, is mildly diverting in the way that Masala is preferable to a Korma but the dumbed down pedestrian precincts numb

both mind and senses. The cruciform parish church of St Swithuns looked interesting from the outside but was shut. Outside, forming the centrepiece of a small roundabout, is a cannon monument, a gun captured at Sebastopol in 1855 during the Crimean War. Retford's the sort of place which closes for the night when the shops bolt their doors. Nuff said.

You may spot a Morrisons supermarket in town - that's the site of the old Retford ground at Oaklands Playing Field. Since the late 1990s, United have played at Cannon Park (named after the above piece of ordnance), a mile out into flat farmland on the B road to North Leverton, beyond the canal and railway. It's an uninspiring home. The best bit is the social club, which is light and cheery, its interior enlivened by displays of photographs and signed shirts. A large aggregate car park fronts the north end, with breeze block turnstiles in the north-east corner. On the east side are two portable buildings, one unused and the other accommodating directors and guests. The red-brick social club is located centrally, set back slightly and has a veranda-style cover. Refreshments and souvenirs are on sale from a hatch. Rules are rules, so the players (laughably) have to negotiate a narrow, unlit canvas concertina tunnel across a 15-yard strip of tarmac from the dressing rooms at the far end. Somebody will turn an ankle in there one day. Beyond are two more ugly portable buildings, used by the supporters' club and stewards. The west side is dominated by a kit stand offering four rows of black plastic tip-up seats. Unfortunately, a bright spark had the idea of positioning it immediately behind the substantial dugouts, which means you need to sit on the back row to see the game. The two ends are open, with a training pitch to the south. Concrete hardstanding runs around the playing surface, which is surrounded by a white railing. The lights are masts, three per side, with three lamps on the middle ones and two on those at the ends. The perimeter fence is concrete panelling, save for the west side, where it is wooden. The land rises suddenly to the east but, otherwise, its fen-style topography so there's nothing to see.

This may be an uninteresting set-up but that shouldn't detract from the achievements of Retford United, who, thanks to strong financial backing, have charged up the pyramid since their formation in 1987, whistling through the Gainsborough League, Notts Alliance, Central Midlands League and Northern Counties (East) League to win a place in the new (and I'm thinking wholly unnecessary) UniBond League Division One South. Coincidentally, Carlton Town have made progress from similar origins at an almost identical rate.

United's programme (according to the cover) was a Programme Monthly award winner last season - and it's easy to see why. It's an excellent effort and good value at rather less than this league's standard price of £2. My

favourite feature was Blarney with Belle, the most comprehensive player interview I've ever read in a programme. Sample question: Could you locate a stop cock? Honest striker Mick Goddard replies: No. He also reveals he once met Kimberley from Girls Aloud in Leeds, though not, I imagine, at one of the city's many cultural hotspots.

So, all a bit dreary. After three second-tier UniBond games in a row, I feel as miserable as Bob the Badger looks. Next time, I'll give another league a try.

06/20