

TT No.98: Mike Latham - Weds 24 October 2007: Northern League Division One. **Chester-le-Street v Shildon**. Result: 2-1; Attendance: 94; Admission: £4; 32pp programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 3*.

Some time ago the Northern League, mainly through the efforts of their indefatigable and inspirational chairman Mike Amos launched a war on bad language by players in their league.

I don't know all the ins-and-outs but from what I've learned they were largely pooh-pooed by the FA. It's a viewpoint that has gathered in strength from chats I've had with referees' assessors during the season- they're not hard to spot, especially given the games I've attended this season. Control the game and punish the actions that threaten injury to the players seems to be the dictum, ignore the rest- in other words: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones but words cannot harm me.'

But words can harm the ambience and enjoyment of spectators and potential sponsors of any league and Amos's crusade certainly gained some support on a cold evening in Durham.

Put simply the language of both teams in this local derby was simply appalling. And I am not talking about the odd curse here and there or the seemingly obligatory shout of 'F*** Off' when the left full-back puts an intended line ball haplessly out of play.

I am referring to gratuitous abuse, continual insults and fearful berating of the match officials in the most sickening form I have heard for at least 24 hours- for, as a spectator at a Conference North game the previous evening, I had heard a striker, rightly given offside, respond by calling the linesman a 'F***ing cheating one-eyed scumbag c***.' You might think this type of behaviour would result in a red card, particularly as it was within hearing distance of at least 50 spectators including families 'enjoying' a half-term holiday evening out together. But you would be wrong. The linesman responded with a meek: 'Get on with the game,' and the player was able to continue his foul-mouthed diatribe for the rest of a depressing evening.

In other words, it is a problem- and a growing one - throughout the land, especially in leagues such as the Northern League where there are occasions where the players and officials outnumber the spectators and on-pitch oaths are easily heard.

So, to Moor Park, a relatively new ground (c1980) located on the A167 between Chester-le-Street and Durham and accessed alongside the Chester Moor Inn. There is a smallish car-park and a social club outside the ground. Once inside and having gathered the team line-ups from the notice-board helpfully sited adjoining the entrance it's a case of meeting old friends. Despite the overall attendance being

under one hundred I find, that despite driving 150 miles, I know at least 10% of the crowd- the joys of being a groundhopper.

Rupert has made his way up from his southern fastness (and later shares his misgivings with the players' behaviour and also the performance of the referee who, he reckons, should have brandished the red card on several occasions), there are two hoppers from Malta, another from Jersey, one from Milton Keynes, one from Staffordshire plus some of the local genre. Of the latter one, a well-known local schoolteacher, not only has taught several of the players on view but also their parents and grandparents. "The Shildon left-back," he helpfully informs, "was an excellent History student. But not as good as his mother."

The ground, despite its comparative modernity, is a bit ramshackle with a pitch that doesn't look like it's seen a mower for several days. The pitch is strewn with leaves from adjoining trees, which according to a local are 'last season's leaves.'

An incredibly tolerant referee seems determined to let go any offence other than attempted manslaughter (for which he may administer a small caution) and the swear-count mounts. And we are not talking just four-letter words here, we are talking serious, sickening abuse.

On the plus-side the programme is a good effort, so too the club's website. We learn one of the home players has been sent-off recently for abuse of the official while being substituted. 'When will they ever learn?' asks the editorial. When indeed?

There is a good view to be had from the main, cantilevered stand and there is cover on all four sides of the ground including a decent terrace behind the far goal. But, strangely, there is no tea bar and on a cold evening that is a must. Even the hardened travellers who have spent the afternoon watching Hartlepool Reserves are beginning to wax lyrical about the hot chocolate they purchased for £1.50 that very afternoon.

The swearing goes on to the end and a remarkably high number of players walk off the field on the final whistle without even attempting to shake the hand of an opponent.

'Enjoy the Northern League while you can,' says one acquaintance. 'Like it or not the Unibond League will claim some more clubs at the end of the season and a few more will probably fold. Don't forget this is Division One- the second division is even more depressing.' Depressing indeed.

The league has a fine website, a Northern League Club that represents great value and the best in-house magazine of all. But evenings like this make one want to throw in the towel and stop being a groundhopper - despite the best efforts of club officials it's a thoroughly dispiriting occasion. Amos often writes that the game would be great without the players- wise words, softly spoken.

If you have the stomach to continue the best advice is to get those Northern League grounds in quickly. They may not be around too much longer. The North-

East, we are told, is a hotbed of soccer. It's a hotbed in the sense of people wanting to talk about the professional game on local radio talk shows and by watching satellite television. But actually, getting out on chilly autumnal evenings and following grassroots soccer- then forget it.

But then again who could blame them? For, there was no pleasure to be gained from this disgraceful spectacle that besmirched the game of football. Thank goodness for Rugby League.

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