

TT No.221: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 2nd May 2009; **Stone Dominoes** v AFC Blackpool; NWCL Division One; Res: 6-1; Att: 61; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (44pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Stone Dominoes knocked spots off their North West Counties League counterparts in a remarkable finish to the First Division season - but seem destined to miss out on promotion. The Staffordshire club, under manager Shaun Hollinshead, have won 13 of their last 14 games as part of a club record sequence of 12 straight victories. The single failure, a 4-1 defeat at rivals AFC Liverpool last week, looks likely to prove expensive. Padiham, who occupy second place behind champions Bootle and have a far superior goal difference, need only a point from Tuesday's trip to lowly Darwen to render meaningless this weekend's final-day showdown with Stone at the Arbories Memorial Sports Ground. AFC Liverpool are now out of the running after being held 1-1 by visitors Chadderton, who equalised just five minutes from time.

It's a bit of a shame, really, because Stone's facilities are much better than those found generally in the NWCL, and would undoubtedly grace the top flight. The Doms play at a picturesque rural location on the edge of Yarnfield village, a couple of miles from Stone, whose main claim to fame was being an important stopping-off point on the once-mighty Trent & Mersey Canal. Stone's ground, officially the M-Way Stadium at Motiva Park thanks to a sponsorship deal with a vehicle rentals company, is part of an impressive multi-pitch facility, most of which is 21 years old and shared with a number of other clubs, including Stone Old Alleynians, of the West Midlands Regional League Second Division. The Doms are just completing their second full season back at this site after a spell in exile about six miles away at the Kings Park home of Meir KA while their new ground was being built.

If approaching from the A38 via Yarnfield Lane, the complex is on the left before you reach the rather well-to-do village. With a large car park covered in a light-hued aggregate, and the wooden perimeter fences painted dark green, it has the air of a garden centre. A turnstile block gives the game away, and a flagged path leads right into the heart of the set-up. Three pitches, each railed off, and with dugouts and superb playing surfaces, are located to the right. These are used by Stone's lower level co-tenants. Nearby, there is an amusing sculpture - I guess it counts as public art - made up of four giant dominoes. Picnic tables make a nice spot to linger in good weather. The low, wooden building of dark green wood to the left houses the dressing rooms, social club and a light, bright hospitality area for the Doms' officials and guests. The social club, fitted out with comfy sofas, a bar and satellite TV, is particularly pleasant, and its walls are covered with newspaper cuttings relating to the team. One tells of the Pioneer to the Life of the Nation award given to life president Bob Bowers, who founded the club in 1987 at St Dominics Catholic Church scout, cub and beaver group in Stone for his youngest son and friends from St Dominic's Priory School (Stone) and St Joseph's College

(Trent Vale). Bowers let the boys pick the name, and they came up with the Dominoes pun. After rapid growth, the club now field two senior teams and eight for juniors aged under nine to under 18. Inside the door of the social club, obliging secretary Pauline Matthews leaves photocopies of the team sheet. Everywhere, the welcome is friendly, and the atmosphere warm.

The entrance to the M-Way Stadium, down an alley next to what is effectively the players' tunnel, is to the left at the end of the main building. A turnstile at the bottom brings the spectator out in the north-west corner of an open, tidy ground. The floodlights, comprising three sturdy masts on each side, looked strangely low for our visit. This is because it is a telescopic system - something enforced by planners after objections from those inhabiting the new houses to the west of the complex, despite the estate arriving second on the scene. A familiar tale. The pitch, like the rest here in wonderful condition, appears to be huge, and encourages passing football. The main spectator accommodation is on the west touchline, along whose length runs a propped cantilever stand sheltering a couple of broad steps of concrete terracing. A plaque at the near end commemorates the official opening of this "community stadium" by Cllr Ann Edgeller, the mayor of Stafford Borough, on May 24th last year. The middle section of the stand is given over to two rows of black plastic tip-up seats. The stand, about five yards deep, is of corrugated metal sheeting - in dark green to blend in with the rest of the facility.

A broad strip of concrete hardstanding runs round the pitch, whose barrier is one of metal rails mounted on wooden posts. Shallow earth banking, protected by a fabric cover, rises at each end. A higher, grassy bank encloses the ground on the east side, beyond which meadows head towards the A38. Two dug-outs, and a smaller fourth official's shelter in the same Perspex design, are positioned on the halfway line on this far touchline. Netting mounted on poles keeps the ball within bounds at the south end, which, after a patchy row of trees, gives way to more grazing land. Trains rattle by on the electrified branch line linking Stoke-on-Trent with Stafford. The north end backs on to the car parks. The setting really does feel very much in the middle of nowhere, though it's pleasantly bucolic.

Make no mistake, as a contest, this game was a slaughter, even though Stone were missing skipper Niall Maguire owing to a family bereavement. Only Jamie Cook, who made a number of superb saves, including several in one-on-one situations, stood between AFC Blackpool and an even bigger drubbing. What a shame his language was shop floor industrial. The visitors, in their previous guise as Blackpool Mechanics, were perennial strugglers in this league, and a change of name a year ago after a merger with Squires Gate Juniors, does not appear to have precipitated any change in status.

It was 3-0 by the 17th minute - and AFC Blackpool had got off lightly. James Curley volleyed the first goal of a hat-trick when a poor clearance dropped to him on the edge of the penalty area, big Nick Stone hammered home from 10 yards when top scorer Dan Brown nodded Chris Rowley's deep cross to his feet, and Brown lobbed the advancing Cook adroitly, having latched on to a long ball from the back. The

most spectacular of Cook's catalogue of saves denied Anthony Marshall, but Michael Meszaros had a back-post tap-in when the visitors again disintegrated in the face of Stone's neat passing and incisive movement. Out of the blue, AFC Blackpool pulled one back four minutes before the break. Liam Hill was given the time and room to pick his spot from 20 yards, and produced a delightful finish into the corner of the net.

Brown, limping badly, failed to appear for the second half, but Stone continued to dominate. Cook's Canute-like opposition could not last indefinitely, and shortly before the hour, the Doms made it 5-1. Meszaros finished a neat move with a pass which gave Curley the chance to steer home an angled shot. Two minutes later, Meszaros crossed accurately again from the right, and double act partner Curley got ahead of his marker to thump in a firm header from eight yards, so completing his hat-trick. That wrapped up the scoring, though burly Stone substitute Oliver Rabie must be wondering how he failed to net. He sent an 18-yard volley whistling inches over, and Cook - inevitably - made a block with his legs in another one-on-one. I bet AFC Blackpool were glad to get back off to the Fylde. For them, the season cannot end soon enough. The official attendance of 61, shown on the league website, was a considerable puzzle because even the most generous head count garnered 43 souls. Perhaps backroom staff pay to get in here.

Stone manager Hollinshead felt his team needed to win their last 15 games to clinch promotion, and to go so close must be agonising. Whether the Doms, as friendly a club as they come, can go one better next season could depend on keeping ace marksman Brown, whose 32 goals this term have attracted the attention of other clubs. Perhaps they'll be able to count on the domino effect to retain his services.

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