

TT No.35: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 9th September 2008; **Daventry Town** v Northampton Spencer; UCL Prem Division; Res: 1-2; Att: 103 (h/c); Admission: £4; Programme: £1 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

If you've got it, flaunt it. In Daventry Town's case, the 'it' is their vivid purple and amber livery. Owner, chairman and saviour Iain Humphrey introduced the colours when he stepped in a couple of years ago to haul the then-ailing club up by its bootstraps. They are daubed on just about every surface to make Communications Park a startling splash on the Northamptonshire landscape.

Humphrey, the managing director of a mobile phone company, has overseen a transformation in the facilities at the ground, as well as success on the field - and has recently announced even bigger plans. Spending up to the start of this season resulted in new floodlights, pitch and perimeter fencing, hardstanding and four 3G artificial surfaces for community use. But the ambitious Humphrey wants to bring Communications Park, known originally as Elderstubs when the club moved from The Hollow, up to Blue Square Premier standard. Phase one, likely to begin next month, will see a clubhouse and changing rooms built to replace those reduced to ashes three years ago by teenage arsonists. That act of mindless vandalism would, without Humphreys' timely intervention, have finished a club formed in 1883. Town, to receive part funding from the Football Foundation, have only just got their insurance pay-out and clearly don't want to waste any time using the money. Three new stands will follow the clubhouse to complete a £500,000 revamp of what is already a tidy 2,000-capacity ground.

The venue is at the cul-de-sac end of Browns Road on the west side of town, just off the outer ring road and adjacent to Daventry Sports Park. The entrance is opposite a household waste recycling plant. Despite this, first impressions are very good. Here is a ground where much attention has been paid to detail and whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Even the aggregate laid on the car park at this (east) end is in the club's amber colours. A neat sign lets you know exactly where you are, and gives the main sponsors a plug. Simple stuff but highly effective. The perimeter fence, of corrugated metal sheeting, is purple and a gate in it takes you past a pay hut and into the south-east corner.

To the left, where the old clubhouse once stood, is a collection of six portable buildings. Those nearest the pitch contain a kitchen selling refreshments, toilets and a hospitality room for directors and their guests. To the rear is the changing accommodation for players and officials. Access to the pitch is through a gap in the sheds, with removable chains forming a player's 'tunnel'. Making the very best out of what could easily have been a bad job, Town have painted the portable buildings amber with purple doors, fascia's and guttering. The main (and at present only) stand, straddling the halfway line, is a little further down this south side. About 20 yards long and five yards deep, this squat structure is a propped cantilever. It contains five rows of backless red plastic seats laid out on steps

painted purple. I can't recall any other club extending its colour scheme to the floor of the stand! Cleverly mirroring the portable buildings, most of the stand is amber with purple trimmings. Club and sponsor logos on the sides of the corrugated roof and fascia are a nice touch.

Behind this side is a continuation of the car park, though by this point it is unmade. In practice, most fans park on Browns Road, where there is more room. The impressive green domed building - with a decent tarmac car park - is Daventry Indoor Bowling Club and is positioned alongside floodlit, enclosed artificial pitches for football and hockey. The sports park also includes a number of grass football pitches and one of those multi-podded changing/admin blocks which were popular in the 1970s, and have been providing roofers with work ever since. To the south-west, the surprisingly rural terrain rises through livestock-filled fields to a tree-fringed, horizon-topped, appropriately, by a communications mast.

The rest of the ground is uncovered but freshly-laid tarmac hardstanding. The 3G pitches, enclosed, floodlit and home to the Daventry Six-a-Side League, are squeezed into a parcel of land between the unmade extension of Browns Road and the ground perimeter. The west end is even more confined. There is barely room for the hardstanding strip, hard up against the perimeter fence, which is (again) painted purple and overhung by a line of mature trees. At this time of year, they are still in full leaf and give this end a very enclosed feel.

The north side is where Town have most space to develop the ground. There is a good 15 yards of unused land leading up to the perimeter fence, here of a green metal mesh design. Beyond is an area of soggy-looking scrub. This would appear to be the best place to locate the biggest of the planned new stands. The dugouts, around which the hardstanding and pitch barrier kink obligingly, are state-of-the-art affairs. Perspex is bent over purple metal frames. The seats within them are also purple. Ritchie Blackmore would like it here. The floodlights are lowish corner masts, with five lamps on each.

Communications Park is, as the crow flies, only a few hundred yards from The Royal Oak, the home of local rivals Daventry United, who play in the First Division of the United Counties League. If you walk a short way up Browns Road once it becomes unsurfaced you come to Kentle Wood - in the care of the Woodland Trust - and you can see United's floodlights peeping above the rooftops of the Royal Oak industrial estate. You might, as one visitor remarked to me, think Communications Park is cut off from potential spectators. Not so. Hidden behind the trees next to the roundabout leading to Browns Road, and just five minutes on foot, is a large housing estate.

Torrential rain in this pleasant part of Northamptonshire finally ceased about four hours before kick-off and the pitch had stood up well to this and previous deluges. It didn't cut up too badly - even when the heavens opened with a vengeance towards the end of the first half and left spectators running for cover. I guess a 2-1 defeat for the hosts counts as a surprise result. Town, UCL First Division champions and League Cup runners-up last season, were unbeaten in five games since winning

promotion while Northampton Spencer, rebuilding under new manager Rob Gould following a summer of departures, have taken some real beatings of late. As if to emphasise their problems, Spencer's sponsorship arrangements entailed the use of the word Crisis in big letters on their chests. The early stages certainly went with form. Spencer, who, sadly, seem to have ditched their distinctive Hibernian-style shirts, looked like being overrun but they rode their luck and gradually got a foothold in the contest. I'm sure the increasingly heavy pitch had a levelling effect but Spencer battled for everything and won thanks to two second-half penalties.

Town left-winger Richard Wesley was given far too much space during the opening exchanges and his pace threatened to wreak havoc. He blazed over from 10 yards in the first minute before Tom Berwick (11) was just unable to turn home one of his dangerous crosses. Craig Neighbour tipped over a Josh O'Grady (12) 20-yarder but could only watch in relief as a floated Berwick (14) free-kick struck the crossbar and bounced safely into the foliage. Home keeper Joe Mellings reacted brilliantly to paw aside a back-post Adam Hancock (25) header as Spencer recovered their poise but they fell behind two minutes before the break when a knockdown in the six-yard box left Berwick with the time and room to stab decisively past Neighbour.

You felt Spencer needed a quick response - and they provided one within four minutes of the restart. A sharp-eyed linesman spotted a handball in a crowd of players, and skipper Kevin Slinn (certainly not slim!) crashed a confident penalty into the roof of the net. Slowly, the balance of power began to swing towards the men from Kingsthorpe. Wayne Richardson (58), Alfie Taylor (62) and Adam Randall (67) all went close before Mellings gifted Spencer their winner. The Town keeper was too slow to react to a Julian Anger through-ball and when Taylor's shot bounced off Mellings he brought down substitute Dan Sturridge in the scrap for the loose ball. Slinn had just gone off, so Richardson (78) shouldered the responsibility and slid his spot-kick straight down the middle of the goal. Town substitute Danny Finley (87,90+1) twice failed to find a way past a resolute Neighbour in a frantic finish and Taylor (90+2) then broke away in the style of Geoff Hurst only to find the side-netting. The Spencer players' celebrations at the final whistle spoke volumes for their relief.

So, big changes on the way at Communications Park as Town make a mockery of their former status as United's poor relations. Some hoppers may be deterred from visiting before the work is completed but the ground in its present state remains well worth taking in. There's certainly more of substance in the fixtures and fittings than in Town's programme which, though colourful and glossy, relied heavily on the UCL's August newsletter for its content. A shame because with more original editorial it would be a belter.