

**TT No.101: Mike Latham** - Sun 22nd November 2009; Welsh Premier League: **The New Saints** 4-0 Rhyl FC; Att: 503; Admission: £7.50; Programme: got there half an hour before kick-off and never saw one; FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

A couple of years ago I paid a visit to The New Saints' new home at Park Hall, named The Venue, and was pretty positive and enthusiastic about what I found there: *see TT78067*.

On a depressingly cold, dark and damp winter's afternoon I decided to return, lured by the prospect of seeing two of the top sides in the Welsh Premier League go head-to-head.

There was some method in my madness. Chris Pitt's superb book 'A Long Time Gone' charts the story of the long-lost racecourses of Britain and is one of the best researched sports books I've ever read. As I have been wending my way around the country, I invariably try to call in at one of the venues he names in his publication and had been long overdue a visit to the old Oswestry racecourse, situated a couple of miles out of town on the Llansilin road.

The visit over, and very worthwhile too, it was time to head for Park Hall, easily reached by following the Ellesmere road off the main A483. It quickly became apparent that TNS have assembled a side that can play perfectly on their 3G pitch - even goalkeeper Harrison looks an accomplished passer of the ball. Their quick pass and move football, was delightful to watch and they ran out convincing winners.

Rhyl, by contrast, had several players who never seemed to come to terms with the surface and last season's WPL player-of-the-year Gareth Owen seemed particularly ill at ease and was replaced on the hour. Too many Rhyl players failed to realise that 60-yard diagonal passes skim away on the surface and that short passing and quick-paced build-ups are the best way to play on here.

Abbott headed TNS into an early lead before Rhyl's Connolly struck the post with a stinging shot. Once Ruscoe converted a penalty after Berkeley was upended the result was not in doubt and Evans's superb through ball created a slick third for the impressive Jones before half-time. Berkeley added a fourth four minutes after the re-start and TNS might have won by more. Sadly, Connolly suffered what looked a serious knee injury late in the game and as the crowd were leaving an ambulance was arriving.

Apart from one temporary stand near the corner flag there is no cover for the spectators as the upstairs viewing balcony is now out of bounds for the great unwashed and the preserve of the prawn sandwich brigade. There was one turnstile open for paying spectators and the unwieldy admission price inevitably lengthened the queues. The only catering is provided by a mobile catering point

where the two staff were hopelessly out of their depth for the demand for hot drinks and food on such a vile afternoon and inevitable long queues built up.

Parking is another issue- the main car park was full long before kick-off and though alternative parking is available at the neighbouring rugby club the journey on foot to the ground then involves a trek across a muddy rugby field and then down a lane with no pavements.

It is hard to know what TNS are trying to achieve- their team play superb technical football but they give the impression that the pitch is just an addition to the leisure club and the basic needs of the average spectator- to enter a ground without a long queue at the turnstiles, to get a programme, to get a hot drink without queuing for 15 minutes and to have reasonable toilet facilities and a place to watch the game from a good vantage point under cover- are largely ignored.

Rhyl fans sometimes get what I feel is an unfair reputation in this league, but I have always found them passionate about their club and decent to get along with. Despite seeing their team comprehensively beaten and suffering from the disappointing spectator facilities they took everything in good humour. Doubtless they will again see their own Belle Vue ground in a different light on their return- with seats on four sides and lots of cover it would have been a far more pleasant venue than The Venue on an afternoon such as this.

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