

TT No.109: Emma Jones - Sat 28th November 2009; **Newton Aycliffe** v North Shields; Northern League Division Two; Res: 3-1; Att: 153; Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

This, my third visit to a Northern League fixture in a month, has started to consolidate my opinions. And not just about the League, but about football in general. I was impressed by the robust, fast football when I first went in late October to see Ashington play Shildon, and the next game, a week later, with Whickham at home to Northallerton Town, by and large, confirmed my liking for Northern League style. This Saturday's offering was a lively encounter, with plenty in the second half, at least, to keep the spectator involved. It, too, was physical, and energetic, and played at a ground with much to recommend it.

My partner has written of Aycliffe's facilities on a previous visit (*see TT89235*), so I shall confine myself to an update: the planned stands have yet to appear, but the finance, and foundations, is in place, and it is simply planning permission that is needed before construction can begin. The ground being adequately screened from nearby housing by fences and a small, and rather pleasant, area of woodland, it is to be hoped that they will succeed. In the absence of cover, the club provides umbrellas and plastic macs to encourage attendance on wet days. That's another feature of the Northern League that I'm getting accustomed to, and would be sorry to see disappear - the friendliness of the people running the clubs we have visited, and the warmth of the welcome.

The game itself got off to a slow start, and there was little of any moment in the first half, but that all changed in the second. A goal in the 59th minute by Aycliffe's Stuart Owen was swiftly followed by the sending-off of North Shields left-back Chris Farman. Farman, having had his first yellow card for a late challenge, picked up his second for dissent. Well, really a rant, aimed at a linesman, occasioned by his belief that the pass to Owen had come from an offside boot worn by Paul Broom. It was a very poor attitude, but having seen the conduct that followed later from Shields player-manager Anthony Woodhouse, I could see where he got the idea that such behaviour might be acceptable.

North Shields levelled the score in the 69th minute, a long Glen Taylor shot that keeper Ste Richardson should have reached, but Aycliffe fans didn't have long to wait to see their team go ahead again. A foul on Broom a minute later gave Aycliffe a penalty, which Mark Wood popped away easily. The decision went down badly with the Shields manager. We were standing near, and had almost the same view, and it was clear that Broom had been shoved deliberately, and from behind, with no chance to see it coming or right himself. Woodhouse, however, disagreed, and expressed his disbelief to the referee in very forthright terms, before turning his fury on a spectator nearby, on whom he unleashed wholly unwarranted insults.

A second penalty, this time awarded against Aycliffe in the 81st minute, after Chris Renshaw made minimal contact with Mark Minto, was a missed opportunity to draw level. Robbie Livermore shot way over the bar, and Aycliffe put the game beyond doubt in the 84th minute, after Shields keeper Michael Robinson came well out of the area, and lost the ball to Elliot Gardner, the ball then falling free to Aycliffe's captain, Dion Raitt, who ran 30 yards and side-footed it safely home, despite a bobble.

All the while, Woodhouse was ranting about the penalty, and continued to put his view to referee Rob Law as the officials were leaving the pitch. His conduct was anything but the dispassionate assessment of the skills and failings of his team that one would think was part of the necessary skills of a manager, besides making him look childish and petty. It was uncomfortable to watch, and a terrible example for his team. No wonder Farman thinks it's okay to heap abuse on officials.

And that is the aspect of football I don't like, and cannot get used to (and hope never to get used to). Too many players disregard the rules of the game, and play as badly as they think they can get away with. Fouls are never admitted, dives are frequent and largely unconvincing, and exchanges with the officials are disingenuous, or accompanied by insults and bad language. When called up after a piece of bad play, the raised arms and expression of astounded innocence are so commonplace, and fail so often to persuade, that one wonders why players still bother. Do they realise the effect that this has on some supporters, or do they not care that those watching would be more inclined to return if good sportsmanship were on display as often as good football? The FA's 'Respect' campaign fails to flourish, and efforts by the Northern League to reduce bad language are struggling. At the same time, spectator numbers and other sources of income are falling. More petulance and unattractive anger is unlikely to reverse that trend.

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