

TT No.133: *Chris Freer* - Saturday January 2nd 2010; **VCD Athletic** v Thamesmead Town; Isthmian League Division One; North; Score 0-0; Attendance 159; Entertainment value 1/5.

I stopped doing the National Lottery some time ago. I think I figured out after several years that my chances of winning 'the big one' were slightly worse than seeing Forest lift the European Cup again. I bring up the subject of a lottery as I look to find an apt description for my football adventures at this time of the year.

I have a bit of history as regards New Year disappointments, the lowlight of which has to have been a five hour drive to see Darlo play at Exeter City on a bitterly cold New Year's Day earlier this century, only to find that not only was the match frozen off, it was never likely to have been on in the first place. There were accusations of a bit of tit-for-tat over this, as Exeter fans had earlier twice travelled to Feethams, only to suffer the agony of a late postponement.

Back to the present, and I'd been lucky on Tuesday to find a game on at Wingate. I'm in London again today and despite weather forecasts of a blistering 4 degrees above freezing, I'm a bit worried by the sight of frosty lawns in the northern suburbs. Already my chosen game at Dulwich Hamlet has been called off (for the second time in a week) and I set up camp in the Willow Walk to look at my realistic options. Only AFC Hayes, in the Southern League South & West, and VCD Athletic, in the Isthmian North, look do-able, as I'm booked on an early coach home.

I can reach the former by tube, which would suit me best, as VCD requires me to get to Charing Cross for a train to Crayford in Kent. I call AFC Hayes and the office girl says yes, the game is still on at the moment. She doesn't sound convincing. The Mitoo Isthmian website states VCD are playing. I have a decision to make. The lottery balls are rolling and I have to pick one out. I choose VCD.

An hour and a half later I'm making the 15-minute walk from Crayford station to Oakwood, the home ground of VCD Athletic, and praying that my journey is not in vain. The signs are good, the players are heading out for the kick-off and I start to relax. Hang on, though, the visiting Thamesmead Town players and their coaching staff are heading back in again, what gives? Don't they like the state of the pitch, which looks fine to me? Has someone upset them? Haven't they been paid on time?

I ask a steward. Clash of socks, he informs me, and we settle for a ten-minute delay to the kick off. A wag behind suggests we're lucky it's not a woman's team, as we'd be waiting a good hour whilst they changed the rest of their kit to match. Of course, I can't be party to such sexist comments, and certainly won't repeat them here....

The delay gives me a chance to look around the ground. There's no covered accommodation behind either goal, but along one side are a couple of improvised covers over the flat standing. I wouldn't call it hard standing as it is a tad soggy

underfoot. On the opposite side, three kit stands are joined together to provide the requisite 150 seats. A good third of the crowd seem content to take up residence on the elevated areas up by the main entrance.

The game finally kicks off, and I am heartened to see that both teams are way up in the table, with Thamesmead breathing down the necks of the Lowestoft side that had so impressed me earlier this season. In the meantime, I learn that AFC Hayes is called off. Clearly, I have chosen wisely. Or so I think. I stifle a yawn as an erratic, error-strewn, virtually incident-less first half draws to an uneventful close. The pitch looks good, if a little bumpy, so surely two sides with excellent records this season must be able to play SOME decent football in the second half.

I check out the club house at the break. It's large but suffers from a congested seating layout which makes getting to the bar a difficult task. When I do get there, I quickly suss out that beer drinkers will find no cheer here, all the usual suspects being on view with brand after brand of chilled lagers but not a proper ale in sight. The snack bar just inside the turnstile again panders only to the mass meat-munching market.

The game resumes but the entertainment level remains low. The referee is pedantic, asking for one free kick to be retaken three times because HE isn't quite ready, despite everybody else so being. Both linesmen are being continuing harangued by players of either side and the feel-bad factor is high. 0-0 is nailed on and that's how it finishes. Not the beautiful game.

And that's the problem with a lottery. You might pick out the right ball, but you still don't know what you're going to win. Today is my lucky day, but it isn't really.

There's more on my blog at <http://flynn123.wordpress.com> from the man in search of the ultimate match experience - real ale, veggie food and a good game! Still searching....

06/20