

TT No.142: Mike Latham - Sat 23 January 2010: Emirates Scottish Junior Cup 4: Larkhall Thistle 0-1 Newtongrange Star; Att: 400 (est.); Admission: £5; Prog: £1; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

‘How the f***ing hell did your lot beat Pollok?’ an enraged home supporter berated me as I departed Gasworks Park after what could best be described as a feisty and competitive Junior Cup-tie.

It was my first visit to a ground that Thistle, by repute the oldest junior club in Scotland (formed in 1878) inaugurated in 1881, playing in their distinctive red and white colours, and he had obviously confused me with a visiting supporter.

‘Dunno, mate, I’m a neutral,’ I mumbled in reply, unsure what to say and blissfully unaware that Newtongrange, second from top of the East Super League, had indeed knocked-out one of the West Region’s shining lights in the earlier stages of the top junior cup competition in Scotland.

‘A neutral? What’s a f***ing neutral doing here?’ my new-found friend enquired. ‘What’s it got to do with you. And how did they beat Pollok?’

The neutral was here for many reasons, though time did not allow me to go through them all. The crowd was dispersing and with fog enshrouding much of the motorway on the way home I was anxious to get back towards the border in daylight, taking advantage of the 1-45pm kick-off.

The Scottish Junior Cup is simply a fantastic and engrossing competition, the weather had finally relented and this was an intriguing tie between sides from either side of the east-west divide in the junior ranks. And Gasworks Park is a historic venue, and one that my cynical mind reckoned may not be around too much longer given the voracity of supermarket chains to snap up decaying football grounds located close to town centres.

I’m not sure how Newtongrange did beat Pollok but given the way they battled through a difficult challenge against a side from level three of the West Region wouldn’t reckon against them progressing a good way along the route to the final.

Larkhall Thistle FC were founded on 17 April, 1878, playing their first game at Loch Park at the top of Machlan Road and after trying out several venues settled at Gasworks Park in 1881. The venue staged the junior cup finals of 1888 and 1889 and has seen many more dramatic games ever since.

Thistle won the Junior Cup twice before the First World War and are generally recognised with developing more Scottish internationalists than any other junior club, a total of 13. It is also the club’s proud boast that they have nurtured more future senior football league players than any of their junior rivals. Their list of famous alumni includes five future Scotland international captains, namely Alex Raisbeck (Liverpool), Jimmy Hutton (Aberdeen), Jimmy Carrabine (Third Lanark),

Andy McLaren (Preston) and Willie McStay (Celtic) while other great names include Wembley Wizard Jimmy Gibson (Aston Villa) and his father Neil Gibson (Rangers) and Lisbon Lion John Clark (Celtic).

Larkhall was once home to a Scottish Football League side, Royal Albert whose Raploch Park ground was situated virtually opposite Gasworks Park and is now covered by a housing estate. Royal Albert left the league in 1926 and later located to Robert Smellie Park, an enclosed ground on the southern side of the town and moved into the junior ranks. The site was recently developed and the two teams now ground-share at Gasworks Park.

Larkhall is situated about 18 miles south-east of Glasgow and has a population of around 16,000. A former mining, weaving and textile area it has suffered more than most by the decline of traditional industries and is now largely a commuter town for the big city. But the locals have an obvious affection for their club and around 400, which included a good following from the visitors, descended on Gasworks Park for this eagerly-awaited cup-tie.

The ravages of the weather have been such that this was only the second home game Thistle have been able to stage since the end of September, a nightmare for the club treasurer trying to balance the books and defray regular expenses.

A huge, old covered terrace, covering half the length of the field at the Raploch Street end of the ground dominates the sight-lines. At the back is a tea bar that served hot drinks and pies. On the far side of the ground the dug-outs are located and there are some crumbling terraces made of old railway sleepers that afford an excellent view of proceedings.

The tie was fiercely fought and marred by several x-rated challenges that would have resulted in straight red cards in England without a doubt. Scottish referees have a more phlegmatic approach and this one was more lenient than most, proffering two yellow cards to home players in the first-half for two of the worst challenges I have seen in this or any other season. From the second foul the visitors scored what proved to be the only goal of the game from a deflected free-kick.

Despite the undercurrent of the threat of violence at any time the game produced some excellent football and the home side more than held their own and had the better of the second half. With the minutes ticking by one of the visitors' players committed one of the worst fouls I have ever seen and I have been watching football for over 40 years. The referee's response was a yellow- unbelievable, simply unbelievable.

The home centre-half, already on a yellow, appeared to have decided to get himself sent-off and his second appalling foul of the game saw him earn undisputed first use of the bath water. Try as they might the home side could not force the equaliser their pressure deserved.

As the dust settled and I walked back to my car after what had undoubtedly been an engrossing afternoon's entertainment- a world away from the sanitised pap of

the Premier League I have been forced to endure either side of Christmas due to the wintry weather. I spied what appeared to be a Newtongrange fan and enquired: 'How the hell did you beat Pollok?' 'Dunno, mate,' he replied, 'I'm a neutral.' 'This is no place for neutrals,' I replied before adding, 'actually it is, this is football, the way I remember, it was just fantastic.' My new-found friend agreed and we had a chat about the merits of the Scottish Junior Cup before we went our separate ways homeward.

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