

TT No.193: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 27th March 2010; **Anstey Nomads v Dunkirk**; East Midlands Counties League; Res: 1-10; Att: 101; Admission: £3.50; Programme: £1 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Ghouls have had a field day rubber necking at Anstey Nomads' car crash season. The East Midlands Counties League newcomers were on a hiding to nothing before a ball was kicked. Their manager, opting to remain a big fish in the small pond that is the Leicestershire Senior League, decamped to Thurmaston Town over the summer - and took most of Nomads' Premier Division championship squad with him. It left Anstey scrambling about to put together a team. They didn't have the chance to play any pre-season friendlies, and their debut match at this level resulted in an 8-0 drubbing. It was a sorry sign of things to come, and little has gone right since. Before this fixture against title-chasing Dunkirk, just six points - a win and three draws - had been garnered from 29 outings, while the goals against column stood at 120. Anstey, buoyed bizarrely by the second-best average gate in the league, deserve credit for their commitment to seeing out the season, and they may yet be spared relegation. The straws to which they are clutching revolve around geography. It seems a Leicester area club must replace them in the EMCL, a painstaking amalgam of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire. Leaders Bardon Hill Sports, from down the road near Coalville, are likely to leave the competition via the top end if Dunkirk fail to overhaul them. And the teams - one of which, ironically, is Thurmaston - presently occupying the two promotion positions in the LSL do not meet EMCL criteria. Either scenario will do. Anstey are hoping for a stay of execution, and the opportunity to regroup and rebuild this summer. One thing is certain: their players are bound to emerge stronger mentally from the traumas of a tragic-comic campaign of Durham City-esque proportions.

This grotesquely one-sided encounter will linger in the memory for one reason - it was the first time I'd seen 11 goals in a senior fixture, surpassing my previous aggregate high of 10. By an odd coincidence, this landmark encounter also involved Dunkirk. A little over three years ago I watched the Nottingham club whipped 8-2 in a Central Midlands League cup tie at Barton Town Old Boys (2006-07 Jan TT135). Goal whoring aside, there's no real pleasure in seeing any team dismantled so comprehensively. Only keeper Luke Hall, who made several excellent saves, stood between Anstey and total humiliation. To me, they lacked organisation and fitness. The Nomads had a couple of decent players, but they played without pattern, plan, shape and, at times, spirit. Dunkirk are a confident, pacey, mobile side, and afforded the freedom of the pitch, they ran riot.

More of that later. What of Cropston Road as a venue? On a lovely sunny afternoon, it's an appealing spot. A pleasant way to while away an hour before kick-off is to wander down Sheepwash Lane, which runs adjacent to the south side of the ground and features fine examples of the hedge-layer's art. At the foot is the charming, though heavily restored, King William's pack horse bridge over Rothley Brook. This,

as you might have guessed, is where sheep were washed prior to shearing or sale at market. Beyond is Castle Hill Country Park. Gentle wooded slopes make for easy meandering. The A46 dual carriageway (and a hideous pylon line) slices through this idyll, shattering the silence, but makes access to Leicester and the M1 easy for Ansteyites. Swings and roundabouts.

Back at the ground entrance, in the south-west corner, there is an excellent prospect of the facilities, most of which are strung along the far, or northerly, touchline. There is a social club of pebble-dashed concrete panels housing a bar and a counter selling refreshments. "Are these pies ready? How long have they been in?" one club official asks in response to an enquiry about the menu. Comes the reply from another: "Since last week. They might be a bit crusty." A corrugated iron veranda, propped by six columns, shelters two rows of wooden bench seats. There is a concrete apron between the social club and the post and rail fence - painted, in common with most surfaces, red and white - surrounding a surprisingly grassy pitch. The dressing rooms beyond are priceless. A battered corrugated iron structure, its pitched roof streaked with rust, has the air of a hut where Brownies meet. The players emerge from a central door and trot down three steps of terracing to reach the pitch. Breeze block dug outs, painted white and complete with felt roofs, are positioned in front, either side of the halfway line. There is a small car park, accessed via a track from the entrance which passes behind the goal at the west end, next to the social club. Cropston Road, leading to the town centre a quarter of a mile away, runs behind the open north end. Evergreens partially camouflage modern houses.

A new stand, planned to be ready for use next season, is under construction on the south side near the entrance. Its wooden framework is in place, and the rest of the fabric will be added just as soon as Sunday working parties allow. There is partial hardstanding on this side, which tapers so acutely that by the time it reaches the south-east corner, there is barely room between the pitch and the perimeter fence for the linesman to jog up and down. Behind this is a dry beck and Sheepwash Lane. The west end offers uncovered hardstanding. It backs on to an area of grass, mature trees and Rothley Brook. Beyond are two pitches Anstey sold to pay for their floodlighting system, which provides three masts on each side.

So, seat belts fastened? Bucket seats hugging your thighs? Let the latest Anstey Nomads pile-up begin. Banger racing with a ball. As I mentioned, the home keeper's heroics kept the score down. Dunkirk were also guilty of becoming over-excited. In these circumstances, everyone wants their name on the scoresheet, resulting in players getting drawn out of position and obstructing each other as they queue up to score. A little more discipline, and fewer acrobatics between the sticks, and Dunkirk could have had 15. Still, it was a good day for them - particularly with Bardon Hill Sports losing 2-1 at third-placed Holbrook Miners' Welfare.

Here are the key moments of a remarkable afternoon:

6min: Lee Day plays on a long diagonal ball from the back to leave Lavell White clear on the right side of the penalty area. He fires low and unerringly past the advancing Hall (0-1).

16min: Dunkirk skipper Andy Frawley hammers a pass down the left flank, Day does well to twist and cross from the confines of the corner, and White, unmarked again, picks his spot from close range (0-2).

17min: Dunkirk catch Anstey on the hop with a quick free-kick. Shannon Grant has the space to cross, and when the home defenders covering the near post fail to cut it out, White stabs home for a rapid hat-trick (0-3).

37min: The visitors get lucky. Frawley's miscued shot falls at the feet of White, the lack of close attention on whom suggests his deodorant cannot be relied upon. Boy, can he strike a ball. Whack, and Hall is picking it out of the net again. (0-4).

44min: Frawley is clearly tripped by Anstey centre-back Craig Neal as he goes for a one-two with Grant. Day sends Hall the wrong way from the spot. We are on schedule, as erstwhile commentator David Coleman might have observed, for my record attempt (0-5).

47min: The ref, as well as Dunkirk, is showing no mercy. Day attempts to flick the ball past Neal, and it strikes the defender's arm. Penalty. Harsh - Neal had no chance of avoiding contact. Day again outwits Hall (0-6).

56min: Goal of the game. Anthony Gregory gallops through the centre of midfield, and as Anstey players continue backing off, he buries a 20-yarder into the bottom corner (0-7).

62min: A sweet strike. Aidan Brady and Frawley exchange passes inside the penalty area, and the Dunkirk skipper slams a first-time drive past the motionless Hall. I remark to my partner we still have 28 minutes to go. Surely a 10-plus tally is on the cards? (0-8).

80min: Bravo Anstey. The Nomads cap their best spell of the match with a consolation goal. Martin Paston is pulled back by Dwayne Soar in the penalty area, and Anthony Ward, Anstey's top scorer, rolls his spot-kick past Nick Ivanov, who guesses incorrectly and dives to his right. I'm feeling tense now (1-8).

82min: Brady's fancy footwork is a feature of the afternoon. Finally, this king of the assist turns scorer. He bamboozles his marker with a few tricks from an impressive repertoire of magic, and Hall cannot keep out his low effort from 12 yards (1-9).

86min: Cue aeroplane celebrations from the York contingent! Anstey fail to deal with a long diagonal ball from the back (shades of the opening goal), and substitute Jarrod Westcarr, another dribbling talent, cuts in from the right and drills a low shot past Hall (1-10).

Anstey still have eight games of this horror season to go. All but one, are at Cropston Road, suggesting they could advance their points haul into double figures.

St Andrews, another team whose defence leaks like a holed liner, are among the scheduled visitors. Whether the Nomads deserve to remain in the EMCL is arguable, though perhaps they merit a stroke of luck. At least 2010-11 cannot be worse. Can it?

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