

TT No.227: *Chris Freer* - Tues April 20th 2010; **Stone Dominoes** v Oldham Borough; North West Counties Division One; Score: 1-0; Attendance: 81; Entertainment value: 5/5.

Like any seasoned football traveller, I'm not a man who's easily impressed, having seen quite a bit in my 45 years of watching the game. There have been rare occasions, though, where I've been surprised. I've watched some of the biggest stars in British football - Best, Charlton, Gascoine, Rush, Dalglish, McGovern (Ok, I know the last one might be contentious) but I still had time to be in awe of Vinnie Jones when he ruled the midfield at Leeds. I've been in some of the best stadiums in Europe - Old Trafford, Amsterdam ArenA, De Kuip, Stadio Olimpico, Feethams - but stepping out on the enormous South Bank at Molineux for the first time was a real breath-taker. Today I'm at Stone Dominoes and I'm impressed.

I'm always a bit wary of out-of-town sites. My old village team Barrow Old Boys used to regularly draw evening crowds of several hundred when pushing for promotion in the late 1960s. The secret was that the ground was right in the middle of the village and entry was free (you could easily dodge the halftime collection). When they changed their name to Barrow Town and moved out of the village - virtually into the next one - gates dropped to 50 if they were lucky. I doubt they're much more than that today.

So, when I google-map Stone and see that their stadium is in neighbouring Yarnfield, I fear I might be one of around 20 men and a dog (woof woof). When I arrive an hour prior to kick-off, the car park is bewilderingly full. What gives? The answer is a well-run community club which has managed to pull everything onto one site. At the centre is a small clubhouse-cum-cafe bar with two glass-fronted areas from where mums & dads can watch their soccer tots and Under-whatever's chasing the ball about on any one of the four or five full-size and mini-pitches. There's a couple of games underway and there being a decided bite in the wind, I join the dotting parents behind the glass to check out the skill levels, even managing to update some of the mothers who miss one of the goals due to too much gossiping.

Whilst in the bar I check out the local delicacy, Oatcake, a kind of crepe filled with cheese (and sausage if you want a bit of flesh) which is very palatable indeed. The beer unfortunately is restricted to cans. There's a TV in the corner tuned to Sky Sports News but no evidence of live coverage. It's time to see the big boys, and I follow the path down the side of the clubhouse to enter the Motiva Stadium, containing the main on-site pitch. Spectator cover is restricted to one stand, but this runs the entire length of one side, with terracing either side of several rows of seats in the centre. The pitch, for the time of season, looks magnificent.

Stone are second in the table and pushing for promotion to the Premier Division of the North West Counties League. Visitors Oldham Borough are second bottom and

staring at demotion at the end of the season. They both contrive to serve up one of the best games I've seen all season which - despite only producing one goal - is virtually end-to-end from first minute to last. Tackles are hard but fair, the referee doesn't need to brandish a card, and the individual skill level on show belies the status of two teams in the tenth level of English football.

Dominoes have the clearer cut chances, but on the occasions that they test the Borough keeper, he is not found wanting, making a string of brave blocks to maintain the Status Quo. At the other end, Oldham also have good opportunities and have clearly decided not to play for the draw. That they nearly achieve it in the most positive fashion is testament to the effort they put in to their game. When dashing wing-play by the Dominoes sub leads to the only goal of the match fifteen minutes from time, I can't help but feel desperately sorry for the crestfallen visitors from Lancashire.

Key to the high level of skill is definitely the state of the pitch. Cropped and flat as a pancake, with just a bit of give, it allows the touch players to control the ball and make accurate passes. I could watch it all night, save for the biting wind which is starting to penetrate my fleshy bits.

As I depart, I come across a dog, dressed in a Direby shirt, balancing on one leg and spinning a ball on the end of its nose. Astounded? I might have been if it was wearing a Forest shirt. You see, I told you I'm not a man who's easily impressed...

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