

TT No.229: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 24th April 2010; **Walker Central** v Blyth Town; Northern Alliance Prem Division; Res: 1-2; Att: 48 (h/c); Admission: Free; Programme: Free (12pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

Walker Central have work to do - on and off the pitch - before they can secure a place in the Northern League for the 2010-11 campaign. The club, from the east end of Newcastle between Byker and Wallsend, need to finish in the top two of the Northern Alliance Premier Division, whose protracted season will not be over much before the end of May. Despite this defeat by one of three other clubs in the running for the title, and some generally indifferent form of late, the Central remain in second place - but have played more games than any of their rivals. They have, however, secured planning permission to bring their Monkchester ground up to Northern League standard, and are confident the work can be done in a matter of weeks. This will involve locating a 50-seat kit stand on the west touchline, erecting four floodlight masts, building toilets and laying hardstanding round the pitch.

The Central have come a long way since being formed in 1988 by, among others, former Newcastle United midfielder Lee Clark and respected Magpies scout Brian Clark, who is still the chairman. The plan was to give youngsters in an area once heavily dependent on shipbuilding at the famous Swan Hunter yard the opportunity to play football. Growth has been rapid. The Central now run 20 teams, starting at under seven, and offer Soccer Camps for those as young as four. Shola Ameobi and Richard Offiong are the club's best-known graduates. They boast of "close links" with schools and colleges, and claim to be the "heartbeat of the community". That community certainly embraces the club tightly because the ground is hemmed in on three sides by houses, and a tarmac cut-through linking segments of the sprawling red-brick estate bisects the site.

At present, Monkchester is a fairly basic set-up. The entrance off one in what for all but locals must be a bewildering maze of identical streets leads to a small car park adjacent to the buildings of Monkchester Community Centre and the Peggy Shepherd Pavilion, where the club's offices, changing rooms and canteen can be found. This modern, windowless structure, opened by MP Kate Hoey, was built, reveals a sign in the foyer, through the Newcastle East End Partnership, with help from the Government's Single Regeneration Budget. The main pitch is 50 yards away, which could cause grading problems in the future. A junior pitch, to be transformed into a 3G surface to aid the provision of skills sessions for kids, separates the pavilion from the senior set-up, which is fully enclosed. Despite this, the Central do not charge for admission - and give away an A4 format programme. Secretary Gill Grainge, having warned the programmes get snapped up quickly, kindly offered to put a couple on one side for us. Just as well because we didn't see any others but Gill's copy all afternoon.

Mature trees edging all but the west touchline add character to what otherwise would be an unremarkable enclosure. Either early or late in the season, when they are in full leaf, would be the best time to visit. Pick a dry day, too, because until the kit stand arrives there isn't any cover. The stand will go where the flimsy-looking dugouts are located, either side of the halfway line. The pitch, flat and grassy, is surrounded by metal railings painted white. There is flagged hardstanding on the near side only. Broad areas of turf behind each goal and over on the east side provide room for expansion, if required.

I don't need much encouragement to sing the praises of non-league football in the North East. The Northern League is widely regarded as the best step five competition in Britain, and both the Wearside League and the Northern Alliance offer high-quality action. This really was an excellent contest, and put into perspective the shapeless dross we'd endured the previous Saturday in the North West Counties League. Both teams were committed to a passing game, played at a good tempo, and featured several mobile, creative players.

The game was, however, slow to get going and it was controversy that kicked it into life in the 24th minute. Blyth attempted to kick the ball out to ensure treatment for one of their injured players, only for the Central's Steven Forster to keep it in on the right touchline. As everyone stopped, he crossed for the unmarked Liam Mulligan to sweep a first-time effort into the net from 12 yards. Understandably, Blyth were furious. After a brief - and candid - exchange of views, the visitors resumed and the home players allowed Gary Day to dribble unopposed up the pitch and tap into the net. This (belated) act of sportsmanship, which I cannot recall seeing 'live' before, drew generous applause from the crowd. Day then almost caught out keeper Mark Dawson with a spooned effort from outside the box, and Michael Lamb replied with a firm drive as we reached the break all-square.

Stephen Armstrong wasted a great chance to put the Central ahead, drawing a diving save out of the Blyth keeper, and the visitors capitalised by scoring in the 55th minute. Lamb had just cleared off his goal-line, but could not deflect away Mark Andrews' eight-yard header from the resulting corner. The Central, their promotion hopes in the balance, pushed an extra man forward in the last 15 minutes. Blyth held firm, though they were grateful Milligan (twice) and substitute John Campbell failed to hit the target when well placed.

This may have been an excellent game, but my abiding memory of the day will be a chance meeting with Paul Stoneman, who played 10 years for my team, Halifax Town. I spotted a chap in a Walker Central track suit who looked remarkably like Paul in the canteen before the match. In the knowledge everyone has a double, and not wanting to make a right chump of myself, I consulted the Walker manager about the bloke's identity- and it turned out to be Stoneman! Paul said he hails from the Walker area, and, at 37, has been playing in the centre of defence for the club this season - and also turning out for Morpeth Town in the Northern League - following the demise of UniBond Leaguers Newcastle Blue Star, whom he joined from Bradford Park Avenue. Grinning broadly, we reminisced happily about

his stint at The Shay, where he earned a thoroughly deserved testimonial season. He revealed Town's Conference-winning team of 1997-98 was the best he'd played in during his career. Stoney admitted he was a bit long in the tooth to be playing three times a week, and said he'd figured in the Central's midweek draw with Alnwick Town despite carrying an injury. In the Blyth game, he was outstanding, turning back the clock with a dominant display in the air, and impressing with his intelligent passing and air of calm authority. You never lose it, eh?

06/20