

TT No.233: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 1st May 2010; **Fulwood Amateurs** v Freckleton; West Lancs League Prem Division; Res: 2-1; Att: 78 (h/c); Admission: £1.50 (incl. 20pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Fulwood Amateurs' ground at leafy Lightfoot Green on the well-heeled northern outskirts of Preston could be unique. How many other football homes double as a golf driving range? I haven't come across any. There were, we were told, some dissenting voices among the West Lancashire League club's committee when the idea was aired about a decade ago, but the extra income six days a week from land they own has proved a lifeline. Without it, the Amateurs would have struggled to survive. And it seems the pitch hasn't suffered as much as you might imagine. Indeed, with more cash coming in, a greater amount could be spent on the club's main and secondary playing surfaces. It is, though, rather odd, to stumble upon what appears at first glance to be a nice stand, complete with roof-mounted floodlights - and then discover its footballing function is limited to providing a rather unusual segregated shelter within its bays on inclement matchdays. Even more confusingly, it's decked out in Fulwood's royal blue colours.

The Lightfoot Green site, close to the intersection of the M6 and M55, is shared with the adjacent ground of Preston Grasshoppers RUFC, who came here from Lea in 1973. This is a typical medium-sized rugby union club set-up, with a large social club and minimal spectator facilities, which consist of a small stand, built in 1988, and a few bits of shallow terracing. It has been designated the region's elite player development centre by the Rugby Football Union. There are also facilities for squash, rifle shooting and archery.

The Amateurs, who joined the West Lancashire League in 1993, and the Hoppers share a car park, with a narrow, tree-lined lane leading down to the football ground. Here, in the south-eastern corner, is a further, small, parking area. The driving range stand, a cranked structure running the width of the south end, is ahead. It contains the Clive Hester Room, opened, presumably with the rest of the range, in September 1999. This houses a snack bar, and features a curious mixture of football and golf mementoes. There are some lovely Fulwood Amateurs souvenirs, including black and white team photographs going back to the 1930s, and numerous blazer badges.

Trees behind the stand, and also to the west and north, enclose what would otherwise be a very open ground. The main football facilities, deep and low, straddle the halfway line on the east side. Dressing rooms, opened in September 1981 by local legend Sir Tom Finney, who played on the wing for England and nearby North End when he wasn't fixing Preston's plumbing problems, are positioned behind a propped cover over hardstanding, which surrounds the pitch. A large breeze block dug-out completes the picture. The stand of the rugby union ground rubs shoulders in what is almost a back-to-back arrangement.

The north end, in common with the driving range stand, is not fenced off from the pitch with the barrier of blue railings and white posts which feature along the other two sides. It feels decidedly exposed at this point as a result, especially with the second pitch stretching away, albeit at 90 degrees, to the rear. The reserves have finished the season, and their pitch was scattered with golf balls. The west side is interesting. At one end, by a neighbouring house, it is so narrow there is not room even for one spectator to pass another. It broadens steadily beyond a small stand of corrugated metal sheets mounted on scaffolding, and a tin dug-out which has the air of a gun emplacement. Check out the weird assortment of seats in the stand! There aren't any floodlights. It's a tidy set-up, and one of the best in the West Lancashire League. Chuck in the attraction of a programme, and it's well worth visiting. Strictly speaking the club's title ought to be Fulwood Amateur but, possibly as a result of being worn down over the years by mistaken references, they appear now to use Amateurs as the suffix.

Fulwood's title challenge has faded in recent weeks, and though they can still finish second, Blackpool (Wren) Rovers have the championship in the bag. Visitors Freckleton, however, lay bottom of the table, and were desperate for points. With several games still to play, the Fylde club may yet avoid relegation. To add further spice, this derby fixture was a dress rehearsal for the league's Richardson Cup Final four days later at the Lancashire Football Association ground in Leyland.

It's a shame Freckleton turned up only for the second half. By then, they were 2-0 down. Though the visitors pulled a goal back, and had plenty of possession after that, they couldn't force an equaliser, and were visibly frustrated at the final whistle. They might dwell gloomily upon this afternoon, and others like it, if and when next season brings First Division trips to such outlandish destinations as Millom and Crooklands Casuals. A fairly routine opening 45 minutes was enlivened by Fulwood's two goals. In the 13th minute, the energetic Jonty MacDonald made space on the left wing to cross low into the penalty area, where Andrew Spence, unmarked 10 yards from goal, hit a left-foot shot on the turn past wrongfooted keeper Nathan Worrall, on loan from UniBond Leaguers AFC Fylde. Spence had a hand in the second five minutes before the break. He flicked on a long ball, and pacey little striker Mitch Newsham raced clear to outwit Worrall in a one-on-one. The nearest Freckleton went was when Mark Charlesworth, in a good position, headed wastefully over the bar, while skipper Chris Bingley watched a 20-yard drive deflected a foot wide of an upright.

As neutrals, we needed a quick Freckleton goal to kick-start the second half - and got one in the 49th minute. It came out of nothing. Substitute Paul Fiddler pounced on a loose ball 25 yards out, and cracked a tremendous shot into the top left-hand corner of keeper Jim Brindle's net. From then on, the visitors did everything but score. Scott Harries drove straight at Brindle after a flowing move, and Paul Fiddler finished tamely following more neat passing, while Charlesworth volleyed too high and later brought a diving save out of the Fulwood keeper. Despite this, it was the hosts who went closest to adding to the score. Worrall

reacted brilliantly to tip over with one hand a well-struck Jim Slater free-kick, and from the resulting corner, Tom Philips hit the crossbar with a close-range header.

Still, at least Freckleton know they can give Fulwood a game in the Richardson Cup showpiece. Whether they have the ability to beat the drop is another matter. The next upward step for Fulwood would be the North West Counties League. Apart from floodlights, they wouldn't need to do much to the ground, though funding might be a problem. Over to those golfers!

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