

TT No.118: *Andy Gallon* - Fri 12th November 2010; **Bala Town v TNS**; Welsh Premier League; Res: 3-4; Att: 268; Admission: £6; Programme: £1.50 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

THE PLACE: An isolated community hardly at its best on a soggy November day, when the greyness of the skies matched the slate and stone of the sturdy buildings. But tremendously appealing nonetheless. I bet Bala, on Snowdonia's wild and woolly doorstep, is heaving in summer. For the best perspective of the town, climb The Mount, a motte, all that remains of an 11th century castle, just off the eastern end of the main street (Stryd Fawr). From here, you can glimpse Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake, the largest natural lake in Wales), the impressively battlemented Coleg y Bala (once a theological college; now a Christian youth centre) and, for sport fans, the floodlights of the football and rugby union clubs. Atop the grassy dome of the motte, sometimes known as the Tower of Bala and from which the Welsh flag flies proudly, it is easy to appreciate the town's strategic position at the centre of a broad, flat-bottomed valley, carved out by a glacier and on a geological fault running across North Wales. The Welsh word Bala means 'the outflow of a lake'. Tan yr Hall, a gallery on the main street, sells fine mixed media art work depicting the impressive scenery. Had the recession not been hitting my income in the same way as everyone else's, I might have been tempted to buy an atmospheric watercolour of this beautiful valley. The shops in Bala cater for both residents and tourists and, as such, are a varied collection. The presence of a backpackers' hostel, adjacent to the splendid English Chapel, indicates this is a haven for the outward bound. I must return with my walking boots!

THE CLUB: Very definitely batting above their average, but determined to retain hard won Welsh Premier League status. This is Bala's second season in the top tier of the principality's non-league pyramid, and the club's survival in the summer was down to the contentious ejection of Rhyl. The Lakesiders seem determined to make the most of their reprieve. Sadly, though perhaps inevitably, the first team features few locals these days. Many of the players come from Merseyside and the Wrexham area. On my trips to North Wales over the years, I've often got the impression the teams comprise Scouser's not quite up to an outing at Marine, Southport, Prescot et al. Local lads tend to play in the reserves, though Bala have high hopes for the youngsters in their academy, which, owing to WPL status, receives some grant aid. I got a bit of a surprise when introduced to the club's general secretary, Trevor Green. He is a fellow Yorkshireman, hailing from Castleford, and has seen previous administrative service at Glasshoughton Welfare and Ossett Town. Trevor indicated the main part of his role is to ensure Bala continue to meet the requirements dictated by the terms of their WPL licence. Interestingly, he also backed the reduction in WPL clubs from 20 to 12, and claimed playing standards are starting to rise already. My view of the WPL, enjoyable though it is to watch, has never changed. Until the likes of Newport County, Colwyn Bay and Merthyr Tydfil's successor, along with, say, the reserve

teams of Cardiff City, Wrexham and Swansea City, get involved, it will have a credibility problem. In all seriousness, should village teams (Bala's population is less than 2,000) really be members of a 'Premier' competition?

THE GROUND: Though this was an evening game, I, job done in Liverpool, made sure I got to Bala early in the afternoon in order to appreciate fully Maes Tegid and its semi-rural setting. The ground, accessed by Heol y Castell, a wing mirror-scrapingly narrow road just wide enough for a single car, is tucked away in a sheltered spot at the foot of the valley's northern slopes. The north end, featuring a grassy bank (the North Bank?!) fringed with firs, is particularly appealing. As recently as eight years ago, this venue was little more than a field. The only structure was the wooden pavilion, and it still observes the action from the south-west corner. Bala's rise from the Wrexham Area competition of the Welsh National League has been matched by improvement in their facilities. No less than five separate stands, propped cantilevers with four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats, occupy the west touchline. There is a small cover behind the goal at the south end, beyond which is a large car park. The floodlights, up to TV standard, are excellent. A glass-fronted metal box, between the dugouts, on the halfway line on the east touchline has a dual role as media centre and camera gantry. For this game, the TV studio became the club shop, which offers an unexpectedly wide range of souvenirs. A broad area of grass behind the media centre backs onto Heol y Castell, separated from the ground by a hedge low enough to permit free viewing for the parsimonious. There is hardstanding right round the ground, and the pitch is surrounded by a post and rail barrier with a mesh infill. The pitch's drainage was improved during the summer, and the surface certainly stood up well to several hours of ceaseless rain. Landmarks visible from the main stand include Coleg y Bala and the spire of the English chapel. My only criticism, especially on such a vile night, concerns the social club - there isn't one! These are super sources of income for clubs such as Bala, who must be missing out big time because fans treat themselves to a pint in town before and after the game, rather than supping at Maes Tegid.

THE GAME: Well, it looked all over by the 17th minute, when TNS led 2-0. But I reckoned without Bala's fighting spirit. The home team missed a penalty in the first half and struck a post in the second, which they dominated. It was a tribute to second-bottom Bala's gritty performance that the visitors, who boast a full-time squad, felt the need to waste time in the closing minutes. Matty Williams (eight and 17min) got the Saints' first two goals before Shaun Kelly (30min) replied with the strike of the game, taking the return pass of a one-two and crashing a low drive into the bottom corner from 25 yards. TNS keeper Paul Harrison never twitched. A route one move saw Chris Sharp (34min) finish coolly for 3-1. Handball by Barry Hogan gave John Irving (37min) a chance from the spot to make it 3-2, but he shot tamely wide. Never let a central defender take penalties! Williams (44min) completed his treble after more sloppy defending, and that looked like that. But Bala, revelling in the increasingly heavy going, deserved a draw for their sterling second-half efforts. Chris Mason headed a sitter wide, saw a goal-bound effort blocked, by Harrison's legs and then hit the inside of a post in a one-on-one. Sub

Josh Macauley showed him how to finish, nodding home a right-wing cross (65min) and then smashing in a stoppage-time penalty after Harrison had brought down Kelly. Generous to a fault, the Bala fans, many of whom appeared to be Welsh speakers, applauded their battling part-timers off the pitch at the final whistle. Must be a nice club to be involved with.

THE PROGRAMME: From bright cover to interesting content, Bala's issue is a very good production. I particularly liked the full-page Travel Blog, which awarded TNS a 64% score for the Lakesiders' recent visit to Park Hall. TNS were marked on the journey to Oswestry, the ground, its facilities, warmth of welcome, prices, programme, food, atmosphere and support, the game itself and the after-match entertainment. Also, nice to see input from other clubs; in this instance, a column by Prestatyn Town media man Mark Jones. Updates on developments in the Welsh Premier League - perhaps more interesting to a visitor than to locals - also caught my attention.

THE VERDICT: A thoroughly enjoyable hop. Scenic journey, fascinating little town, tidy, attractive ground, friendly club officials happy to offer a cheery welcome to what they dub 'hopyrs stadiwm', a highly collectable programme and an exciting game. The miserable weather aside, hopping doesn't get much better than this.

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