

TT No.14: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 20th August 2011; **Thurnby Nirvana** v Desborough Town; FA Cup EPR; Res: 3-3; Att: 46; Admission: £4 (including 8pp programme); FGIF Match Rating: *****.

Forty-three minutes in, I feared I'd boobed in my choice of FA Cup action. Thurnby Nirvana, early leaders of the East Midlands Counties League and making their debut in English football's leading knockout competition, were 3-0 up against Desborough Town and apparently romping into the next round. Ryan Amoo (a deflected 20-yard free-kick), Pearson Mwanyongo (a tap-in) and Matt Melbourne (a low shot from the edge of the box) found the net. It had been one-way traffic from the kick-off. Then, deep in stoppage time, the visitors from the United Counties League were awarded a penalty, and David Glass despatched it to give themselves a glimmer of hope for the second half. Mere consolation, it seemed. Not a bit of it! Whatever the Ar Tarn manager said during the interval worked a treat because his team emerged from the dressing rooms transformed. By the 69th minute, after goals from Jamie Gilsenan (a 20-yard free-kick) and Glass (a superb rising drive into the top corner), it was 3-3 and Thurnby, 5-0 and 4-0 winners in their two league games this season, looked badly rattled. But the home side clung on by their fingernails, and could have snatched victory through impressively elusive right winger Mwanyongo five minutes from time, only for the Desborough keeper to save superbly with his legs in a one-on-one.

Just as well it was a tremendous contest because Thurnby's Dakyn Road ground (and their lamentable programme) is not terribly inspiring. The same, of course, could be said of grim Leicester, amid whose magnolia bland eastern outskirts Nirvana are located. Can there be a duller ring road anywhere in Britain? The view never changes! The club are the product of a 2008 merger between Thurnby Rangers and Leicester Nirvana. Rangers, who have played at Dakyn Road for 34 years, had senior status, while Nirvana brought to the party a small army of mini, junior and youth teams. It means sides down to under-eights now play under the Thurnby Nirvana banner. The first team haven't dragged their feet since the amalgamation, winning promotion from the Leicestershire Senior League to the East Midlands Counties League for 2010-11 and lifting the League Cup during their debut season at Step Six.

The ground is too open and undeveloped to be appealing. The bulk of the facilities are clustered at the top of a grassy bank behind the Willowbrook Park end goal. This looked a nice spot for a pre-match picnic, but no sooner had the rug been put down and our goodies unpacked, it began to rain. Just another English summer day, then. The original building, slightly to the left of the main pitch, is next to the entrance. This dowdy red-brick structure houses the dressing rooms and club house, where the chap serving refreshments turned out to be Thurnby Rangers' founder and landlord. Underlining the harsh realities of football at this level, he revealed Nirvana would lose money on the tie if they didn't win and bank the £750

prize money on offer. Two railed tarmac paths (one for players; the other for spectators) drop down the bank to the pitch. Further along the bank, directly behind the goal, are two boxy stands, accessed via a sandy track. The first is all-standing. We had this, executive box-fashion, to ourselves. The other stand has four rows of blue plastic tip-up seats.

From either of these elevated vantage points, the ground stretches away into the distance. The pitch, flat and fairly bumpy, is railed off and there are floodlights, with twin dug-outs on the side backing onto Thurncourt Road. This side also has a narrow training area, and there is a second pitch on the opposite side. Owing to a lack of hardstanding, the far side and bottom end are out of bounds to spectators. The presence of mature trees around all but the Thurncourt Road side give the ground a semi-rural feel (you could almost forget you're in Leicester) and help enclose it a little. This is important. Without the trees, this really would be an exposed set-up.

Thurnby Nirvana are unusual in that one of their coaches is a woman. I'd expect nothing else of a club who so clearly represent all aspects of Leicester's diverse community. But proving that it's not just blokes who lose the plot completely at football, she maintained a stream of nonsensical top-of-her-voice babble throughout both warm-up and game. Thankfully, after a while, we were able to tune out her exhortations. Judging by the way they let this tie slip from their control, the home players followed our example.

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