

TT No.190: Chris Freer - Sat March 17th 2012; AFC Kempston Rovers v King's Lynn Town; United Counties Premier; Score: 0-1; Attendance: 198; Entertainment value: 2/5.

When I was a kid everybody had two names. I don't mean your 'given' and 'family' names, I mean the 'nick' name that we all had. I was pretty good at dishing them out and making them stick. Indeed, there are probably fully grown adults wandering around today still suffering the moniker I inflicted upon them more than a generation ago. Likewise, both my kids are referred to by myself with a name not listed on their birth certificates. One of 'em even answers to it.

My son has a friend called Patrick McKensie or something similar. "Ah, Paddy Mac", I proclaim. My son gives me a bemused look and says "Nobody calls him that...". No, well they wouldn't would they, not in this day and age.

Of course, most football teams have always had two names. At least two. When I worked in Wolverhampton, it was generally accepted that their main rivals West Bromwich actually had four. The Albion, the Throstles, the Baggies, and - according to Wolves fans - the Shit. Must have taken them ages to come up with the last one.

There has been a bit of a trend for clubs in recent times to play around with long-standing names, especially if there is a convenient reason for doing so. I remember a good, few years back when Leyton Orient ditched the first part of their historic title and became just 'The Orient'. It didn't last too long. Likewise Bournemouth & Boscombe FC thought that was too much of a mouthful and adopted AFC Bournemouth as being much snappier. Unwittingly, they set the ball rolling, especially amongst so-called 'phoenix' clubs, starting up from the ashes of liquidation, or simply established by fans as local rivals to their seemingly friendless big brothers.

We've already had AFC Wimbledon and AFC Telford. What price an AFC Kettering, or an AFC Portsmouth even.

I'm off to an AFC today. It's a change of plan due to my wife having cracked a bone in her foot and needing a chauffeur for six weeks. So instead of taking a train to West Yorkshire and sampling the beery delights of Leeds and Keighley, I'm looking for a ground which I can easily drive to after dropping off the missus and kids at the Mother-in-Law's. A scan of the Step 5 fixtures reveals an intriguing encounter in the United Counties Premier, where league leaders King's Lynn Town are visiting seventh place AFC Kempston Rovers.

Curiously, of these two teams it is King's Lynn Town who are the 'phoenix' club, having been set up a couple of years ago when predecessors King's Lynn FC folded. Commendably they decided not to go with the modern flow when setting up the new structure, and settled for adding a traditional suffix to the name. They have

also inherited the stadium, which is up to Conference standard, much of the former fan-base, and are the “Manchester United” of this division. So, to a club like AFC Kempston - who are not a new club, but simply use the prefix as an ‘umbrella’ for the various organisations operating from their Hillgrounds Road home - a visit from KLT means a chance to make some dosh.

Part of the covered terracing has been turned into an impromptu barbecue, where a handful of eager serving lads and lasses are poised to dish out a never-ending flow of hot dogs and meaty burgers to a ravenous procession of punters. It doesn’t quite work out like that, as all they seem to succeed in doing is driving most of the crowd to the other end of the stand, thanks to the eye-stinging smoke emanating from the ‘barbie’ for much of the afternoon. They get a bit of a helping hand from the staff in the spacious clubhouse bar, who despite having a selection of pies on offer, sadly neglected to switch the pie-warmer on early enough, so promising potential customers a half-hour wait. At a quarter to three that’s not really an option.

A plus-point is the availability of a hand-pumped ale. Geography students - or just knowledgeable footy fans - will know that Kempston is a suburb of Bedford, a traditional brewing town, and home to the Charles Wells brewery. Their Eagle IPA, a 3.6% session bitter, is the brew on offer and I sample a swift half prior to the game. Very enjoyable it is too. The lack of any veggie food - in the bar or on the barbecue - means I settle for a Snickers bar as my half-time repast.

Kempston’s ground consists primarily of a large modern clubhouse/admin/changing room complex, with covered terracing and seats to the fore, which runs for much of the length of one side of the ground. The other three sides are flat standing. As with Tipton last week, visibility from outside the stadium is good, so a considerable amount of screening work would need to be undertaken before the Rovers could ascend the football pyramid. The pitch has a decided end-to-end slope, albeit not one of Berwick Rangers proportions.

With visiting fans making up probably two-thirds of a 200-or-so crowd, it’s like a home game for King’s Lynn, who proceed to baffle neutral onlookers by looking nothing like a table-topping side for much of the first half. The home team aren’t a lot better and a dire half is only enlivened by a flurry of goalmouth activity at the end. The fickle Lynn fans who gather round me for the second period are not slow to voice their one-sided opinions of their opponents ‘time-wasting’ tactics (it’s 0-0 with 40 minutes to go), the officials’ obvious bias (they’re having a sound game apart from awarding a free kick for a trip that was a good yard into the box), and their own players’ shortcomings (they really begin to put in a good shift after the break). As a neutral I can afford a wry smile. I AM that kind of fan when I’m watching Forest.

The winning goal when it comes is a disaster for Rovers, but typifies the sort of luck you need to win a championship. With barely five minutes left, a low-cross, loops high off a home defender onto the post and into the net via the keeper. There’s barely time for Kempston to cap the defeat by having a man sent off - it

has been a niggly game right from the start - before the whistle is blown and the fickle fans celebrate.

At least they have the satisfaction of seeing their team on the way back up, after all those dark days of not so long ago. Proving that there is indeed life after death and encouraging fans of those clubs - like Darlington and Port Vale - who are currently going through that pain. And the main lesson? You don't necessarily have to saddle your re-born club with an 'AFC'.

AFC Glasgow Rangers? Or Clyde Valley Royals, anyone...?

There's more on my blog at <http://flynn123.wordpress.com>

AFC 300 Grounds & Counting....

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