

TT No.39: *Justin Holmes* - Sunday 11th September 2011; **Neath** v Carmarthen Town; Welsh Premier League; Venue: The Gnoll, Neath; Score: 1-0; Admission: £7.00; Programme: £2.00; Attendance: 456; Match Rating: 2.

After originally planning just a day trip to South Wales yesterday, I eventually decided to stay overnight, attracted by what was, for me, an attractive looking game in the Welsh Premier League between Neath, one of only two full-time clubs in the league and for whom arguably the "superstar" of the Welsh Premier League plays, Lee Trundle, against Carmarthen Town, whose Richmond Park ground my bedroom overlooked when I lived in the town.

The Gnoll is located about a ten-minute walk from Neath train station via the town centre. Unsurprisingly for a ground they share with Neath Rugby Club, historically one of the giants of Welsh rugby before regional rugby took over in Wales and for whom the Gnoll has been home since 1871, it is an impressive, traditional stadium far superior to most other grounds in the Welsh Premier League. However, spectators at football matches are only allowed along one length of the pitch, in the all-seater main stand, which offers good views of the action despite some obstructing supporting pillars. Along the opposite length is a temporary looking all-seater stand with white tarpaulin type cover, behind one of the goals is a covered terrace, and behind the other goal is a smaller uncovered terrace. Admittedly, only having one length of the pitch open is more than sufficient for Neath's level of support (even being one of the best supported clubs in the Welsh Premier League), but it would be nice to be able to move around the stadium, and to at least have a standing area. The 24-page programme is an all-colour publication but printed on fairly poor-quality paper. It contains a fair number of interesting articles, but lacks a league table, line-ups from each league game, and information on how other clubs in the league have fared recently, which would have been nice for a programme costing £2.00.

It is certainly fair to say that Neath are much stronger playing at the Gnoll this season, winning all three of their league games by at least two goals so far this season, whereas they have lost both of their opening away league games without scoring a goal, most recently last Wednesday when they lost at the home of the other full-time outfit in the Welsh Premier League, The New Saints. They found themselves in fifth place in the league table ahead of the weekend's fixtures. Carmarthen Town are usually the steady Eddies of the Welsh Premier League, always comfortably mid table, never threatening the top nor being sucked into a relegation scrap. It is looking like that may change this season though, having made an awful start to the season, gaining just one win and losing their other four games so far, including a 0-3 home defeat against Llanelli in midweek which followed a 1-6 hammering at Prestatyn Town last weekend. They found themselves joint bottom of the league, only goal difference keeping them from rock bottom.

So, everything pointed towards a comfortable home victory, but that was certainly not how the game panned out. The first half was competitive without really ever being entertaining, and Carmarthen at least looked a match for their hosts, possibly even slightly the better side, although the goalless score-line at half time was predictable from fairly early on. Surely Neath would wake up and push on to claim the victory against demoralised opponents? The answer to that was no, as they played progressively worse, repeatedly playing poor passes and barely threatened towards goal. Carmarthen could clearly sense they could snatch an unlikely win, as they did most of the attacking in the early stages of the second half, but they never really convinced that they could score. Suddenly, on 66 minutes, Luke Bowen of Neath hit the post, and this seemed to finally spark Neath into life, and just two minutes later they went on to score what turned out to be the only goal, when Trundle rolled the ball across the box and Paul Fowler rifled the ball in from just inside the penalty area. It was harsh on the visitors, and although they continued to play some reasonable football, they still rarely looked like scoring, with the few promising attacks they did manage to make petering out as they approached the box. So, an expected but ultimately rather fortunate three points for Neath, for whom Lee Trundle was occasionally a joy to watch with his tricks and skills, although they rarely led to attacks on goal and was not the influence on the game that his talent, experience and quality should provide.

07/20