

**TT No. 1: *Andy Gallon*** - Sat 4th August 2012; **Athersley Recreation** v Cleethorpes Town; NCEL Div. One; Res: 3-3; Attendance: 222; Admission: £4; Programme: £1.50 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: 5\*.

Today's professional footballers get plenty of stick for behaving as if they live in a different world to the rest of us. Financial security means they do, of course, inhabit a planet unknown to the average Joe, and many - cosseted and absolved of responsibility from a tender age - appear to find growing up an insurmountable obstacle. Geoff Horsfield, I suspect, is an exception. He started his career with Athersley Recreation, a relatively young club (formed 1979) from a housing estate in the north of Barnsley. After a couple of false starts, Horsfield, whilst working as a bricklayer, eventually made his name as a free-scoring striker (30 goals in 40 games) in the Halifax Town team that won the Conference title in 1998. He remained with the Shaymen in the Football League for a few months before securing a dream transfer to Fulham. Other moves followed to Birmingham City, West Bromwich Albion and Port Vale. The price tags totalled £7m. On retirement as a player, Horsfield, presumably fairly comfortable financially, joined the coaching staff at Vale Park, but soon quit the role to return to the building trade and start his own business.

Now the really heartwarming bit: Super Geoff (as Halifax fans dubbed him) is clearly not a fella who forgets where he came from. During the summer, he purchased from Barnsley Council the 60-year lease Athersley Recreation have on their Sheerien Park ground. This selfless act of generosity gave his old club, Sheffield County Senior League champions in 2012, the confidence to make the improvements to their facilities required to clinch promotion to the Northern Counties East League.

What a job club officials and volunteers have done over a few short months. Owing to objections from residents over floodlighting the undeveloped ground used in the County League, Athersley had to start from scratch with the adjacent pitch. No wonder my unknowing question "did you have to do much work here then?" prompted chuckles from the Penguins manager and everyone else in earshot. Tasks included enclosing the ground, railing off and tending the pitch, laying hardstanding, erecting two kit stands, floodlights, dug-outs, a souvenir shop, toilets and a pay hut, fencing in and levelling the car park, positioning new signs and splashing a lot of black and white paint about the place. No wonder everyone was so excited about the club's long-awaited debut at this level of football!

Sheerien Park, accessed rather quirkily via a track between two houses (Nos 123 & 125) on Ollerton Road amid the vast Athersley North estate, was not the intended destination on the opening day of my 2012-13 season. But plans to watch West Didsbury & Chorlton make their home debut in the North West Counties League were derailed by yet another forecast for lousy weather. Athersley got the nod on the basis they had more cover! Glad I made that decision, too, for this was an

excellent game featuring four goals in six minutes, three penalties and a balance of power that swung first one way then the other. The enthusiastic crowd, swelled by numerous familiar hopping faces, was the second largest in the NCEL, the tea bar did a roaring trade and programmes sold out half-an-hour before kick-off. To cap it all, the weather, entirely contrary to predictions, remained glorious almost throughout. For once this so-called summer (the bulk of whose Saturdays I've spent watching amateur rugby league), the broly and waterproofs could be left in the car.

The game started slowly, but just as hopping legend Leatherhead Dave suggested it needed a goal along came four in the blink of an eye. Lee Stephenson (17min) put fellow NCEL debutants Cleethorpes Town ahead from the spot and dreadful marking allowed unmarked central defender Aaron Greenbeck (20min) to tap in for 2-0. Jason Bentley (22min) got one back with a well-struck penalty before Stephenson (23min) smashed the goal of the day into the net off the underside of the crossbar. Leading 3-1 at half-time, Cleethorpes (the Owls, no less) looked sure-fire winners. Their play was all method; Athersley's mostly madness. But the second half was a different story. The Penguins (even better!) were transformed. Bentley (50min) saw his penalty blocked by keeper Miles Fenty, but prodded home the rebound, and Jack Briscoe (65min) finished coolly in a one-on-one to make it 3-3. The points seemed to be heading Athersley's way. But the visitors rallied and squandered several very good chances in the closing stages to win the match. A draw the fair result, however. I'd say both teams need to tighten up at the back. All three penalties were real 'softie's'.

For numerous reasons, a good day and a cracking start to another season's hopping. If there's any natural justice in the world inhabited by you, me and former professional footballers, Geoff Horsfield's construction business will be a great success.

04/20