

**TT No.126: Mike Latham** - Sat 16 March 2013: Spar Mid Wales League, ER Jenkins Cup Round 1: Kerry 1-4 Talgarth; Attendance: 15 (h/c); No admission or programme; FGIF Match Rating: 5\*.

Sometimes the Groundhopping Gods look down upon you and I was very fortunate today, more by luck, than good management seeing the best game I've seen all season, and I've seen a few.

The threat of snow led me to abandon plans to visit Scotland where the quarter-finals of the Junior Cup were taking place; in the end two of the four ties survived the weather. Instead, I set off for Wales, originally intending another trip along the North Wales coast, perhaps dipping into Anglesey. But I've been along that route a lot just lately and as I approached the Wrexham turn-off from the A55 I decided to head to mid Wales instead.

For such a major road which connects the heartland of Wales the A483 isn't my favourite; there are far too many single-carriageway stretches and too many impatient drivers willing to take a risk overtaking the seemingly never-ending number of tractors and caravans. But I had time to spare and the weather looked reasonable so I decided to head to Kerry, a destination for one of the recent Hop weekends.

I can fully understand why people love the Hops but I must admit I prefer to visit grounds in their natural state rather than crawling with groundhoppers that give it an unreal atmosphere. Kerry is a village in Powys, about three miles south-east of Newtown. It's a small community though a number of impressive new houses have been built on an estate on the Newtown side of the village. Following the road through the estate leads the traveller to Dolforgan Park, home of CPD Kerry.

Kerry gives its name to the Kerry Hill breed of sheep and there are plenty of them dotting the hillsides around the ground. For such a small place (its population is around 800) the village has a rich historical past. There's a parish church of Norman origins, it once staged a battle nearby in 1228 between Llywelyn Fawr and Hubert de Burgh and the Kerry Ridgeway is an ancient path 15 miles long from Cider House Farm to Bishops Castle in England which was a long-standing trade and drovers' route from Wales to the lowland English markets.

Kerry was also the terminus of the Kerry Railway, later a branch of the Cambrian Railways, connecting it to Abermule. The line, which was primarily used to transport timber from the nearby forests ceased in the late 1950s. There's also a magnificently restored, Grade II listed cast iron bridge spanning the River Mule situated behind the far goal at Dolforgan Park. Built in 1818 with links to the legendary engineer Thomas Telford it had fallen into disrepair but has been sympathetically renovated in recent years thanks to grant aid and the support of the local community. The bridge was on the former drive-way to Dolforgan Hall.

Arriving at Dolforgan Park the weather was closing in and the threat of rain prompted the match referee to remark to one local that we might be lucky to get the game finished. The pitch was heavy but well grassed and perfectly playable at the start. Dominated by the new-built housing estate it might be, but Dolforgan Park remains a scenic venue with lots of trees, fields, rolling hills and the church spire as its backdrop while the River Mule flowed at a fast rate behind one end.

The ground is typical of this level of football, a level which incidentally I enjoy as much as any these days. There's a small cover straddling the halfway line at one side which looks as though it had links in the local agricultural economy and a small dressing room and tea bar complex opposite. Neatly enclosed by a post and rail fence, with plenty of room to wander about and plenty of car-parking it fits the bill for me.

At first sight the game looks unpromising. The visitors have arrived with a bare eleven players and their manager is also doubling up as club linesman and first aider. By contrast the home side have a full complement and the way they warm-up suggests they mean business.

The ER Jenkins Cup is the league cup for clubs in the second tier of the Spar Mid Wales League. But initially it appears as though it's far from the top of Talgarth's list of priorities. The absences in personnel, the friendly linesman explains are down to several players having gone on a trip to Cheltenham Races. He explains he's aged 62 and a fully registered player who is called upon when needed. His 17-year-son is playing on the left-wing and has threatened to walk off the pitch if dad walks on as a player.

But I've been at this game long enough to know that everything is not as it first appears. Initially the game goes according to script as the home side dominate and take the lead when one of their midfield players curls a beautiful 20-yarder over the visiting 'keeper.

The weather is beginning to turn and what was a reasonably mild and dry afternoon becomes wet and cold. The rain arrives in full force, dotting the distant hills with snow. Whether it's a culture shock or not but the visitors suddenly wake up and show they have several decent players in their ranks, not least my new found friend's young son. Deservedly, Talgarth equalise and in added-on time they take the lead.

A very decent cup of tea is served in the tea bar and one of the home substitute's jobs is to fetch a brew for the referee, who has controlled matters with firmness and authority. The two club linesmen are excellent, proving once again my theory that this is a far better and more cost-efficient arrangement for this level of football than having three officials.

Talgarth start the second half the livelier as the rain continues to fall. In no time the pitch begins to cut up and become really muddy in places. It's a good job the rain didn't arrive an hour earlier or else we'd have struggled to finish the game.

The eleven good men and true of Talgarth have now warmed to their task. Awarded a penalty they increase their lead to 3-1 and then the home side is depleted by having a player instantly red-carded for an isolated instance of foul play in a really sporting encounter. Talgarth even have two or three good penalty claims turned down and then begin to tire as the ten men of Kerry, freshened by substitutes from the bench press forward.

Just a few minutes remained when Talgarth sealed the tie with a goal scored on the counter-attack. The goal-scorer then generously gave way to the team manager/ linesman/ first-aid man who played alongside his son in the dying embers of a really enjoyable game. Despite good-natured protestations the son stayed on the field and Talgarth, against the odds, sealed a famous victory. As I say, I haven't enjoyed a game more all season. It was fantastic.

04/20