

TT No.30: *Justin Holmes* - Saturday 8th September 2012; **Grays Athletic v Norwich United**; FA Cup 1st Qualifying Rd; Venue: Rush Green Stadium, Romford; Score: 2-1; Admission: £8.00; Programme: £2.00; Attendance: 157; Match rating: 3.

With a ticket for the evening session of the Paralympic Athletics, it was necessary to find a game in east London today, and this game fitted the bill perfectly - even if events during the match would mean a mad dash to make it in time back to the Olympic Stadium in Stratford for the 1900 start time there. It would also be an opportunity to visit a ground which had looked like it had been consigned to history a few years ago as a senior football venue, but reopened this summer.

The Rush Green Stadium is located just under two miles from Romford train station and town centre, with very frequent buses plying the route, and is now the home of Grays Athletic, after they spent the last couple of seasons ground sharing at East Thurrock United since leaving their traditional home in Grays, the New Recreation Ground. The stadium used to be the home of Ford United and then Romford until 2008, since when it has been the home of West Ham United reserves, and so it remains. Full credit to West Ham United too, who own the facilities and are apparently allowing Grays to play there rent free whilst Grays try to locate and build a permanent stadium in their home town. Apparently the ground had fallen into quite a bad state in the last four years without a senior team playing there, but since Grays were given the green light to make the Rush Green Stadium their home for at least the next two years, much work has clearly gone into making this a neat and tidy stadium. Along one length of the pitch is the all-seater main stand, with a fairly interesting design of a crescent shaped roof. Either side of the stand are several rows of uncovered terracing. Along the opposite length are a similar number of terrace steps, with a small portion straddling the centre line having basic cover. Behind both goals is just hard standing. Unfortunately, spectators are set quite some way back from the pitch on all four sides. The programme was good with plenty of interesting and relevant information to digest.

Today's match would provide the opportunity for a giant-killing, with a team from the Eastern Counties League Premier Division visiting a club from a tier above, the Ryman League Division One North. Both teams have had reasonable starts to their seasons, Grays in fourth position in their league with two wins and a draw from their four games, whilst Norwich United are in sixth place in their league, with nine points from their five games. To reach this stage, Norwich United have defeated Stansted at home 2-1 before beating Eton Manor 0-2 away. Grays beat Takeley 1-0 at home in the last round.

On a fabulously warm and sunny afternoon, it was the visitors who looked the livelier and showed the more attacking intent in the opening exchanges, before the game came to an abrupt halt with barely ten minutes on the clock, when the Norwich United striker Nathan Howard went down and couldn't be moved until an ambulance had arrived. Initially thought to be a dislocated shoulder, it turned out

that Howard had actually broken his collarbone in four places. A delay of 35 minutes ensued and about ten minutes after the game restarted, it was Grays who took the lead, when the ball was played to Joe Sweeney towards the edge of the penalty area, and his powerful drive took a deflection before hitting the back of the net. It was quite harsh on the visitors, although after the goal, the home side increasingly imposed themselves on the game, however there was no further score by the time half time arrived at 4.37.

The second half was an entertaining one, with Grays ever more dominant yet Norwich did have the stand-out chances from time to time, notably on 51 minutes when they hit the post and on 60 minutes when their striker tried to dribble around the keeper instead of taking the shot, allowing the keeper to smother the ball. Less than two minutes later, Grays took command of the game with a second goal. A lovely pass with the outside of the boot by Sweeney was played forward to Joao Carlos to the corner of the penalty area, and he took the ball towards goal before scoring with a low shot under the keeper. Norwich had a great chance to get a goal back almost immediately, but the keeper saved well and the loose ball was scrambled away. From this point, Grays had some fantastic chances to make the score-line more emphatic as they dominated the game, however out of nothing, Norwich were given a lifeline four minutes from time with a quite wonderful goal by Nathan Fox, who took control of the ball wide of the penalty area, set himself before floating a ball over the keeper and into the net. Very much game on now, and in the closing minutes it was the visitors who looked much more likely to score and get an equaliser, but it was not to be and it was Grays who progress to the second qualifying round.

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