

**TT No.95: Chris Freer** - Sat February 2nd 2013; **Blaby & Whetstone Athletic v Barrow Town**; East Midlands Counties; Score: 0-1; Attendance: 67; Entertainment value: 4/5.

As a young teenager, one of the real pluses of living in our Leicestershire village was that we had a 'Boy's Club', a fully kitted out building that featured a football pitch, two snooker (yes snooker, not pool) tables, and a cafe furnished with an up-to-date juke box - and no girls allowed! Needless to say, my mates and I spent a lot of time hanging out there in our pre-pubescent days. Sadly, the club folded, the building turned into a factory and then demolished, and the next generation of village kids had to hang around on street corners.

These were the days before kid's football clubs really took off. Someone told me recently that it was a teachers' strike in the 1980s, when they refused to supervise out-of-hours activities, that led to the demise of school football teams and the rise of external junior clubs. My son - being a sporting type - is a member of both a football and a cricket club, but he doesn't have access to what I had - a true Boy's Club!

They do have something similar in Blaby, however, in another part of the 'foxhunting' county. Granted, it's now for both boys and girls, but as I discovered when I turned up for an East Midlands Counties football match, some of the old traditions still ring true.

I'm going local today because I have early evening 'baby'-sitting duties. The wife is attending a horsey AGM, and so I'm needed to keep my eye on the X-Box Kid. As it turns out it's a fortunate outcome as my original intended target - a Southern South & West fixture at Evesham, which involves an expensive train journey - is called off mid-morning.... a lucky escape! Even so, the icy blast coming through the front door is enough to make me seriously consider curling up on the settee for an afternoon watching the rugby. I tell myself this is what I intend to do, as I slowly don layers of clothes and fool myself into climbing into the car and heading off to Leicester. Even then I think I am fated as overhead signs announce that the M1 is closed, and a tricky detour through the back-streets of Loughborough ensues.

Undaunted, I arrive at the Warwick Road ground of Blaby & Whetstone Athletic in good time for the 3.00 kick-off. The club used to be known as Blaby United in the old Leicestershire Senior League days, although I can't recall ever coming here in support of Barrow Old Boys. Today the latter's successors, Barrow Town, are the visitors, and with third playing second, it promises to be an epic encounter.

First, I pay my fiver, pick up a prog, and am directed through a small door into the clubhouse - or should I say Blaby & Whetstone Boys Club, which is what it is. The smallish room is devoid of much seating, is dominated by two pool tables, and features a snack bar where every variety of soft drink and chocolate bar is on display. But no alcohol of any description. Small boys enter and disappear into an

adjacent room which on further inspection features a small football court and several ping-pong tables. I buy a bottle of Lucozade, avail myself of a cheese baguette into which I am invited to load onion from a separate dish, and listen to the kids doing what kids do!

The ground itself is fairly minimal. There's a small breeze block stand capable of seating about 70 on a good day, plus a curiously-roofed terrace opposite. One and a half sides of the ground seem to be out-of-bounds so I stand where there's no wind and get ready for action. Visitors Barrow were once runaway leaders of this division, but a couple of 0-1 defeats to other title contenders, plus games-in-hand being eroded, means they are now second behind Basford. Blaby & Whetstone are coming up fast in third, and a home win today would see them close the gap on Barrow to 7 points with two games in hand. So, it's a crucial game for both sides.

It's the visitors who have the better of the first half hour, with three clear-cut chances spurned before Athletic even stage a meaningful attack. When they do get their act together towards the end of the first half, they're stunned just before the break when a corner isn't cleared and a visiting striker clips the ball home. The home side come out after the break with much more purpose and look to be taking the initiative until one of their number takes exception to a strong challenge - both sides have been taking no prisoners - and makes as if to punch his opponents lights out. The referee deems it a straight red, and away he walks. The pressure on Barrow is lessened, but there is still the potential for the game to go either way right up to the end. A full-bloodied encounter that's no place for boys - just as well they're all in the clubhouse playing pool...

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

Real kid's stuff....

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