

TT No.41: *Mike Latham* - Sat 23 November 2013: NCEL Division One: **Knareborough Town 4–0 Dinnington Town**; Attendance: 117; Admission: £4; Programme: £1; Raffle ticket: £1; Coffee, pasty, peas and gravy: £4.

Freezing overnight temperatures in Scotland put paid to my intended visit to a Junior Cup-tie, an early morning text from my friend in Fife warning me of black ice and the closure of the M74 near Moffat. I later set off for North West Wales but encountered horrendous traffic going south. So, I hastily re-routed and ended up crossing the Pennines and going north up the A1 and making the relatively easy journey to Knareborough, whose ground is conveniently located off the A1 for those travelling by car, just down Manse Lane in an industrial estate.

Knareborough Town are relative newcomers to the NCEL after progressing through the West Yorkshire League and I'd been meaning to visit here for a while. I'm glad I made the effort. On the face of it the ground is rather bland and featureless, albeit superbly maintained. There's a decent, well grassed pitch with post and rail fence and the standard seated stand and small cover behind one goal to satisfy the ground-graders.

But the club has a nice, friendly feel. The bloke at the turnstile and the raffle ticket seller are both welcoming and there are lots of other helpers around, always a good sign. Most people seem to know one another, there's some good banter flying around and an air of vibrancy. Knareborough is a relatively prosperous place and a decent population to support a senior football club and a fair number of locals have turned out on a dry but chilly afternoon.

The best feature of the ground is a lovely, stone clubhouse with one of the best catering outlets I've had the pleasure to visit. It's spotlessly clean and the two ladies that run it obviously take great pride in what they do. I went for Cornish pasty, peas and gravy and a cup of coffee, all excellent. Pre-match most of the supporters suffered the agony of watching England suffer a last-minute defeat to New Zealand in the Rugby League World Cup semi-final at Wembley.

Knareborough also produce a good programme and put up the team lines in the clubhouse window so full marks for that. The visitors were world-beaters if you took notice of the individual pen pictures in the programme, the goalkeeper has 'superb reactions and is a great shot-stopper', one forward 'terrorises his opponents', another is 'unbelievably fast and terrorises defences', the winger is 'fast, quick-thinking and plays some great balls.' I expected great things from them.

The NCEL in my experience is an excellently administered league with a website that sets the standards for others. The clubs that have recently joined the league, Knareborough being one all seem well organised and with good, smart facilities. Many have twitter feeds and obtaining information is easy. There are some gems of grounds to visit and though Manse Lane wouldn't win any aesthetic awards it has a

lovely ambience. As the game starts, it's a lovely, crisp and clear winter's afternoon though after the sun begins to fall in the sky the temperature dips.

The home team won this game at a canter, striker Colin Heath scoring a first-half hat-trick including a penalty and they played some decent football. Most of the spectators gathered clubhouse-side or behind the near-side goal, leaning on the barriers and only a handful walked over to the far side to sit in the stand. Those that do include the referee's assessor (the clip-board gives him away) and mum, dad and a well-behaved boy who seem rather disconcerted by being just yards away from the home side's player-coach and right full-back during the second half. He has a voice like a foghorn and peppers every instruction with liberal use of the 'F' word. I'm with Mike Amos and the Northern League here. I don't see why this should be the accepted norm. Spectators are de-sensitised by behaviour that becomes commonplace.

There's also a lone home supporter who finds it necessary to stand on the yellow lines in front of the stand marked 'no standing here' throughout the game, obscuring the views of those in the stand.

So even in the pleasantest of places there are some things to annoy. And truth be told the referee begins to get on one's nerves. He's one of those who has to keep up a constant commentary, 'keep it clean, lads, elbows down' that sort of thing throughout the game. The linesman on the far side has more important things with which to contend, a savage glare from the setting sun, but he just gets on with his job uncomplainingly and with some aplomb. He realises the spectators have come to watch the game, not the officials.

The referee misses one bad foul that should be at least a yellow and loses his intensity in the second half. The assessor is writing notes in his clipboard. The no2 continues to bellow throughout the increasingly chilly afternoon. So, by the end I'm a bit fed-up, the game has drifted towards a predictable conclusion and Dinnington, despite their big write-ups are pretty poor, though they do have one or two decent players to be fair. It ends with a 4-0 home win, the last goal a curling free-kick that eludes everyone including the goalkeeper. The locals are pleased and one of the committee members is at the exit, wishing everyone well, thanking them for coming and telling everyone who cares to listen about the next home game, another good touch.

Nice club Knaresborough, I'd recommend a visit here. But truth is, after several successive Saturdays in Scotland the contrast between the approach to junior (non-league) football up there and in England was brought home to me. In Scotland players play for the love of the game, express themselves, have fun, go all out on the attack, give their all and as soon as the final whistle blows all is forgotten. And the referees are superb, absolutely superb.

In England many games are often cynical, spoiling and attritional, dominated by players with loud voices and limited vocabularies. If I was a player, I don't think I'd enjoy playing football at this level and as a spectator I don't generally enjoy watching it any more. Referees tick boxes but don't deal with the issues that

really matter. And I forgot my camera, so no pictures. If I was being graded by a groundhopper's assessor I wouldn't tick any boxes.

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