

**TT No.53: Mike Latham** - Weds 1 January 2014: Evo-Stik Northern Premier League, Premier Division: **Skelmersdale United** v Marine; Result: 4-1; Att: 303; Admission: £8.50; Prog: £2.20; Coffee: £1; Pie/Peas: £2.50; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match rating: 4.

With rain lashing the country I opted out of the postponement lottery that a search for a new ground to visit would have involved and opted to watch what is, in my opinion, consistently the most entertaining football team in the Non-League circles over the past few years.

Tommy Lawson has been in charge of Skem for the past six-and-a-half years and they recently notched their one thousandth goal during his reign, a statistic that speaks volumes for the brand of attacking football he encourages. Skem earned promotion from First Division North as champions last season and began the New Year sitting proudly on top of the Premier Division. They lost at home just once during 2013 and their consistent home form has been the cornerstone of their success.

When Skem first moved from their Whitemoss Park ground to their new one on Statham Road, known to the locals as Stormy Corner they were, I recall, plagued by drainage problems. But these days the playing area seems capable of resisting at whatever the elements can throw, and it was huge credit to the home club that they managed to stage a game on such an unpromising afternoon.

With games falling left, right and centre to the waterlogged pitches and even normally immaculate pitches as neighbouring Burscough failing to withstand the amount of water that fell from leaden skies the only two real hopes of a game locally wrested upon Chorley, whose Victory Park pitch was built upon an old ash tip and rarely falls foul of water-logging and Skem. Fair play to Skem who posted news of a precautionary and successful 1-20pm pitch inspection on their website and were rewarded with a better than average home crowd against their rivals from just along the M58.

It's got to be said that there are plenty of better new builds than the Skem ground, which is neither pleasing to the eye or particularly spectator friendly. Located at the far end of an industrial estate, just a few minutes' drive from J4 of the M58 motorway it has a heavily fortified club house and small covered enclosure behind the nearside goal and a small seated stand straddling the halfway line along the far side. The design of this stand leaves a lot to be desired as the view from the front two rows is obscured by railings and most of the spectators, huddle in the back two rows. The rest of the ground is flat standing with the grass banks now out of bounds to comply with ground safety regulations.

But there are compensations from what seems at first sight a rather bland and featureless ground. First of all the locals are friendly, the bloke on the turnstile, the programme seller and the ladies in the tea bar all pleasant and welcoming, you

can get a decent cup of tea, pie and peas and a cheap pint of in the club house which has big screens to keep people up to date with the latest scores. And car parking is easy on the road outside the ground or on the main club car park.

And then there's the football- take it from me, Skem are breath-taking at times. They must have a fraction of the budgets afforded to some of their rivals in this division and regularly lose players to other clubs further up the pyramid. But Lawson has the enviable knack of consistently unearthing jewels of players who play a beautiful passing game, that builds up nicely in the final third. They seem to love playing football, which is half the battle and are a joy to watch.

This game was proof of the point. Marine competed well for the first half-hour but Skem then moved up a gear and in a breath-taking spell of football simply took the game away from the visitors. They scored three goals in five minutes and the points were in the bag. Continuing to attack with freedom and confidence they scored once more, might easily have added several more, then conceded a late consolation to a Marine side that commendably never threw in the towel.

So, there it finished, a 4-1 win for Skem; a really enjoyable game it was too, superbly officiated by a referee and two assistants who really communicated with the players, looked like they were enjoying themselves and made due allowance for the conditions. To get through a competitive derby match without a single yellow card while maintaining full control was a fine effort by the referee and one of which he can be justly proud. According to the programme his name is Gary Hilton; he was fantastic.

I first saw Skem when Steve Heighway and Brian Hall played for them before going on to enjoy fine professional careers with Liverpool. That seems a long time ago, highlighted by a piece on Heighway in the excellent, full colour programme. Just like their famous two predecessors, the current crop of Skem players are a joy to watch and it was a great way to start the New Year.