

TT No.54: Chris Freer - Saturday January 4th 2014; **Basford United** v Tadcaster Albion; Northern Counties East Premier; Score: 5-3; Attendance: 101; Entertainment value: 5/5.

It's very rare these days that I buy a lottery ticket. I used to be a regular 'gambler' when the UK Lotto first saw the light of day, but now it takes a pot of monstrous proportions in the Euro millions to get me to part with my £2. Like the first draw of 2014, with something like £93m in the kitty, and the kids almost pushing me out of the door down to the newsagent. Shall I, shan't I? I resist the temptation and re-pocket my stake.

Besides, it's a lottery enough at the moment trying to gamble on which football match to set out for. Despite having been relatively lucky so far this winter, every match day is a challenge, and I'm again sitting in front of the inter-web waiting for confirmation that my target game - at Runcorn Linnets - is definitely on. When that assurance finally comes through, it's just a bit too late for me to make my rail connections. Standby games in the Midland Alliance (Tividale, Gornal) are falling like skittles, so I have to play my trump card, the one I was saving for a rainy day. And it's raining today.

Basford United are in the North East Counties Premier, and only a short train and tram journey away from chez-moi. Their Twitter account says all the signs are positive, subject to a final inspection at 11.30am so I gamble and head off into Nottingham. As always my first port of call is the Vat & Fiddle, the Castle Rock brewery tap, and a pub I used to run when it was owned by Leicester brewery Hoskins in the early 1990s. I keep going back, lured by the Black Gold mild and their addictive cheese & onion cobs, but today I am doubly disappointed. No cobs, as their baker hasn't reopened since Christmas, and no Black Gold either. I have to settle for a 4.2% dark beer called Stuart Adams, which sadly doesn't hold a candle to BG.

So I don't dally, and buoyed by the news that the Basford game is still on, despite the persistent drizzle in the air, I climb aboard the tram and head due north, breaking my journey at the Wilkinson Street halt (for your information, the David Lane stop is nearest to Basford's ground, but I have a couple of pubs to visit first.) I double back to the Horse & Groom, in the imposing shadow of the old Shipstones Brewery which is maintained - externally at least - in pristine condition. The pub is now a free house and although selling Shipstones Bitter - which I believe is currently brewed at the Belvoir Brewery in Leicestershire - I go for Caythorpe Dark Gem, an excellent 3.5%abv Nottinghamshire ale.

From here it's a short walk to the Fox & Crown which is the spacious home of the Alcazar Brewery. They have six of the own beers on, with the darkest being FoxTale Ale at 4.9%abv. Although fruity, it's a bit thin and has that 'home-brew' tang about it.

Ten minutes or so from here is the Greenwich Avenue home of Basford United, who have climbed up the levels in recent seasons under the guidance of former League pro Martin Carruthers, who has assembled a skilful bunch of players which include ex-Villa and England midfielder, Lee Hendrie. After an indifferent start to the season they are on a roll and sit just one place behind today's visitors Tadcaster Albion, who are in second spot in the League having stuffed Basford 5-0 earlier in the season. So, there is more than a bit of pride at stake.

United's ground has several covered areas around the pitch, none of them particularly expansive, but each sturdy enough to keep out the elements. The clubhouse is outside the ground, and is standard fayre with no cask or UK bottled ales, and a snack hatch doing the predictable meaty 'delights', save for chip cobs at £1.50, which I decide might be desirable, given my inability to secure anything earlier.

Given the amount of rain we've had, the pitch looks quite firm, and it's not long before the home side begin to assert their dominance on it, racing to a 4-0 lead before half time, ably prompted by Hendrie. The visiting keeper is not a happy bunny and spends much of the half time period discussing various grievances with club officials. Which probably explains his 50-yard dash to join in a mass melee 20 minutes into the second half. With everybody involved either wading in or trying to separate brawling players, the referee is hard pushed to pick out the main miscreants. So, wearing a bright blue goalies top is nailed on to draw attention. The Tadcaster custodian duly walks, as does a United man, in the interests of balance.

With the score at this stage now 4-1, United seem determined to have what they hold and as the game enters added time appear to have achieved that. Ironically, the five minutes tacked on for the brawl sees Albion notch a couple of near-identical close-range strikes and we finally have a game on our hands. There's still time for the visitors - with their stand-in keeper up with the strikers - to miss the target before Basford break away and roll the fifth into a near-empty net. Cue a lot of shouting, a disturbance between players and crowd on the halfway line, another short hold-up, and eventually, the final whistle.

As I stated in my intro, getting to watch football can be real gamble at times. You pay your money and you take your chances. I could have spent £2 last night and won £93m. More likely I would have just wasted £2. Today I risk a fiver but see a great game of football featuring eight goals, a mass punch-up, turmoil in the crowd, and a frantic finale. I feel like I've just won the lottery!

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

Everyone a winner!

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