

**TT No.36: *Chris Freer*** - Sat November 15th 2014; **Thurnby Nirvana** v Sleaford Town; United Counties League Prem; Score: 7-3; Attendance: 33(!); Entertainment value: 5/5!!!

I have to confess that, probably not unlike many other football nuts throughout this land, I didn't really play the sport at any serious level. Having first become really aware of the 'Beautiful Game' when the local team - Leicester City - got to a couple of FA Cup finals in the early 1960s, I cursed myself for messing around during the school team trials and so ended up as a spectator whenever my schoolmates turned out for a match.

After that, through my late school years, it was just the odd jumpers-for-goalposts kick-about where I would demonstrate my limited technical ability until eventually, I fell in with a couple of work mates who played for a Sunday morning side called Thurmaston Europa. Even then, I was essentially a 'squad' player, wheeled out if someone was injured or didn't fancy that long away journey on a cold winter's morning.

I've a notebook somewhere in which I've recorded the games, results and scorers for the 1982/83 season. The main reason for doing so was that this was a Championship season for the club in question, and I was listed amongst the scorers.

Yes, that was a good year for the team, who played in the Third Division of the Leicester 74 League. Unbeaten until the last game of the season, it provided me with my one-and-only football trophy, which I ensure has pride of place at the front of the family trophy cabinet. But that wasn't the highlight of my playing career.

No, that came when I was in my mid-30s and going to regular 5-a-side sessions with a business colleague and a load of his pals, most of whom were more than useful footballers, much younger than me, and playing at a good level. So being the captain's first pick when it came to choosing sides had me bursting with pride - that had never happened before, at any age level. Nirvana indeed. Pretty soon after that I hung up my boots. Well, it would have been all downhill from there-on in!

Whilst playing for Europa I had a career switch and started running pubs, one of which was the Tom Hoskins, the brewery-tap for a small Leicester company of the same name, sadly no longer with us. The pub, however, still is, and as I'm staying local today (taxi driving for the kids later) I decide to call in for a swift half on my way to the game, to see how much has changed in the 30 or so years since my departure.

The first thing I notice on arrival is the replacement of the pub sign which was mounted on the front wall with a large Leicester City badge. The beer garden is

now covered over, with the mother of all flat screen TVs positioned above the cellar drop, while the original front bar has been dedicated as a shrine to the local Premier League (for this season anyway) club. The lounge (opened in 1986) remains pretty much unaltered, and amongst the fairly standard range of cask beers is Tetley Mild, which is in good nick.

Leicester as a city is ringed by numerous 1950s council housing estates, which once had a not-to-be-messed-with reputation amongst us youths. Times change, and I reassure myself that I won't be taking my life into my hands when I visit the home ground of United Counties Premier league side Thurnby Nirvana, at the heart of the Thurnby Lodge estate.

The first apparent thing on approaching the Dakyn Road ground is the ability to watch the match without having to pay to go in. Overlooking the ground is a huge roadside bank affording panoramic views of the entire pitch. In fact, I suspect if ever there was a must-see cup fixture here, more spectators could be accommodated outside the ground than in!

However, good supporter of football that I am - plus the need to purchase a programme - sees me hand over the fiver that gets me and the car into the stadium. Facilities are limited. The pitch looks good, is wide enough to afford expansive wing-play, and is surrounded by uncovered flat standing all around. The only cover is high up on a bank behind one goal, with a couple of vintage stands (one with seats) that allow an elevated view of the action.

The clubhouse is set up on the same bank, with a tarmac-ed and steeply-sloped walkway leading from the changing rooms. That looks like it could potentially be treacherous on a cold icy winter's afternoon - what price a postponement, not due to an unplayable pitch, but because the players simply can't get to it safely from the changing rooms!

There's a small seated tea-room as part of the clubhouse (no bar) with pies on sale, although things seem a bit disorganised as it takes three people to sort out the tea-urn, so I don't dally, and head off to pitch side.

There then follows the most entertaining 90 minutes of football I've seen in many a long year. Although in the top half of the table, inconsistent form plus a generous defence seem to have blighted Nirvana's push for consecutive promotions, while visitors Sleaford Town seem also likely to ship goals. The home side come out of the blocks and are three-up in the first 20 minutes, playing some scintillating attacking football and with the splendidly-monikered winger Pearson Mwanyongo proceeding - to use modern day football parlance - to 'rip new arses' for not only the left back, but also the midfield players who drop back in an attempt to help him out.

More than once he's illegally upended with the perpetrators simply 'given a stiff talking-to' by a lenient referee, an inaction which will come back to haunt him. However, when Pearson does get away, he lays on a string of chances for his eager team mates. Meanwhile, at the other end of the pitch, the Nirvana defence are in

benevolent mood and shortly after the break Sleaford have pegged it back to 3-3, although no-one really knows quite how.

It's the kick-up-the-bum that Thurnby need, and with Mr. Mwanyongo again going through the gears it's not long before the goals start to flow again. The seventh and last is worth recording here. Pearson is out on the touchline. Three defenders are taking it in turns to try and put him over the crash-barrier. He twists and turns, somehow eludes them all, goes into the box, down the bye-line, cuts the ball back, and a grateful colleague thumps home. There's still time for a bout of team fisticuffs after yet another unpunished foul on our man, then the game is over. Cracking football, a high level of skill for Step 5, ten goals, and a punch-up. Oh, and a missed penalty. And all for a fiver. Nirvana, indeed!

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

Enjoying football heaven...

04/20