

MONDAY, 24 MARCH 2008

TIVERTON TOWN 1-0 HITCHIN TOWN

British Gas Business Southern League Premier Division

Tiverton Town came out on top in an enthralling game at Ladysmead against a Hitchin Town side that has been rejuvenated over the past two months as they battle against relegation from the Southern League Premier Division. In an end-to-end encounter a solitary strike from Simon Bochenski was enough to separate the sides, but the visitors enjoyed the bulk of the possession throughout the match while, perversely, it was Hitchin goalkeeper Martin Bennett that was the main reason the score remained so close as he pulled off a string of stunning saves throughout the afternoon.

Tivvy were the sharpest from the kick-off and pinned Hitchin back for the first ten minutes, although the Yellowws were unable to carve out a genuine goalscoring opportunity. The nearest they came was when Danny O'Brien cushioned a header from tight on the right touchline into the path of James Fraser, but the Bristol Rovers youngster was let down by his first touch and could only chase the ball over the by-line and out for a goal kick. The Canaries of Hitchin soon found their feet and forced their way into the game, and on eight minutes there was a defining moment as Luke Gregson tangled with Chris Vinnicombe and Adam Faux whilst chasing onto a throw-in from the right. The referee saw no wrong and allowed the game to continue but Gregson hit the turf and stayed down in obvious discomfort. After some magic sponge treatment the Hitchin midfielder hobbled on but just a few minutes later was back on the deck and ultimately replaced by the less dynamic Matt Kenneford. It was a blow to the visitors as Gregson had been at the centre of Hitchin's revival, and his cute passing game would be missed for the remainder of the match.

Bobby Hopkinson, making his first start for Tivvy had a shot inadvertently blocked by Fraser as the match resumed but it was Hitchin that were now forcing the pace and they were mighty unlucky not to have edged into the lead midway through the first period. Mark Duckett launched a free kick high into the Tiverton penalty area and Paul Barnes easily escaped the attentions of his marker to head unchallenged towards goal. Martin Horsell was left flat-footed and could only watch in relief as the ball struck his left upright and bounced clear of the danger area. Hopkinson then earned a caution for a late sliding challenge on Carl Williams and Dean Gilbert was alert to the danger as he stifled a Tiverton counter attack when it looked for all the world that Tom Knighton would wriggle clear on goal.

Bennett began his afternoon of top-class goalkeeping by denying Bochenski after 26 minutes with a smart save low to his right, and three minutes later was back in the thick of the action as he parried Knighton's rasping shot. However, Bochenski was the first to react and poked home the loose ball from three yards out to give Tiverton a lead that they would battle to hold for the rest of the game.

Still Hitchin controlled the midfield areas but seldom looked like penetrating a stoic Tivvy defence while the home side were happy to soak up the pressure and try to hit the away side on the break. This tactic almost paid dividends just before the interval when Hopkinson's direct ball from deep forced Gilbert to rush a headed clearance and the ball bounced wide of Bennett and fractions wide of the post. That was the last notable action of a decent first 45 minutes, but the entertainment level skyrocketed after the change of ends as Hitchin looked to extend an unbeaten run that stretched back five games.

Player/Manager Darren Hay, twice a goalscorer against Tiverton in years past introduced himself at the start of the second half in place of Mark Barnes, and his physical presence up front gave Hitchin a different option as the sought an equaliser. Adam Faux was outsized against the burly forward and found the going tough to begin with, but eventually came to terms with the task, stood off and controlled the threat that Hay posed. Indeed it was Hay that became frustrated and eventually earned himself a yellow card for a sequence of niggly fouls while Faux remained calm, collected and effective.

Matt Villis had a half chance but headed Hopkinson's free kick straight at Bennett shortly after the resumption of the game, and five minutes later Tivvy were very nearly gifted a goal out of the blue when Jon Stevenson launched a forty yard backpass that sailed over Bennett's head, bounced on the edge of the goal area and cleared the crossbar by a matter of inches. Tivvy continued to carve out openings against the run of play and Fraser had a shot parried before Bennett quickly switched play to the other end only to see Paul Barnes fire wide after the ball bobbled unforvingly on the Ladysmead pitch.

The closest the Canaries came to levelling the game was after 58 minutes when Gordon Barr pushed the ball towards goal in a penalty area scramble. For the second time in the game Horsell was beaten but Matt Villis raced back to hook the ball from beneath his own crossbar. The clearance fell to Matt Bye, returning to the Tiverton starting line-up for the first time in seven weeks and the diminutive midfielder released Knighton into a one-on-one situation, but Bennett once again showed why he was the star of the show by standing up, making himself big and batting away the Tivvy forward's shot.

The game was open, the action was at one end and then the other in a blink of an eye, and no sooner had Bennett earned his stripes that Tom Pepper fired in a low shot that flew across the face of goal and agonisingly wide. Moments later Barr sent a dipping header towards the top corner but Horsell back-peddled and palmed the effort over the top and out for a corner. The flag kick amounted to nothing and without drawing breath Tiverton moved back to the Swimming Pool End as Fraser sent a hopeful shot into orbit. With twenty minutes remaining there was a feeling that a second goal from the Yellowws would finally knock the stuffing out of Hitchin, and Knighton should have scored it. Chris Vinnicombe reached the by-line and cut back a cross which Knighton met with power no more than six yards from goal. Bennett was a man in form, though, and threw himself across his line to miraculously keep the ball out of the net, and keep Hitchin in the game. Make no mistake: Knighton should have scored but the save was as good as you will see at Ladysmead for many a year.

Bochenski had a shot blocked while Duckett dragged another low effort a yard wide of the post as the frantic nature of the match continued. Fraser found himself clear on goal only to be denied by the continually impressive Bennett while substitute Paul Wyatt, a late replacement for Knighton scuffed a shot wide of the mark having shaken off the attentions of two defenders and marched into the box to be faced with a glorious chance. In the seventh minute of added time Fraser bobbled a weak effort straight at the goalkeeper, but need not have worried for the referee finally brought an exhilarating game to a close.

Sometimes that is just the way it goes - Tiverton could have wrapped things up and scored six or seven in the process as their pace in attack proved a constant throne in the Hitchin side but unfortunately had a bad day in the final third and need to return to finishing school. Meanwhile Hitchin passed and moved in the middle third as well as any team in the league, but lacked the killer pass and as such created very little in the way of gilt-edged goalscoring chances. The Canaries are far from the worst team to have visited Devon this season, and if they can bring their team back to somewhere near full strength they will avoid the dreaded drop. The three points for Tivvy secures their position in the middle of the table, and with more of a cutting edge up front there must now be genuine ambitions of reaching the top ten.

Tiverton Town: Martin Horsell; Danny O'Brien (Radley Veale 82), Chris Vinnicombe, Matt Villis, Adam Faux, Will Gardner, Matt Bye, Bobby Hopkinson, Simon Bochenski, James Fraser, Tom Knighton (Paul Wyatt 84)
Goals: Bochenski 29
Booked: Hopkinson 22, O'Brien 78
Sent Off: None

Hitchin Town: Martin Bennett; David Deeney, Tom Pepper, Carl Williams, Jon Stevenson, Dean Gilbert, Gordon Barr, Luke Gregson (Matt Kenneford 11 (William Davies 76)), Paul Barnes, Mark Barnes (Darren Hay 46), Mark Duckett
Booked: Hay 71
Sent Off: None

Attendance: 371