

SATURDAY, 2 FEBRUARY 2008

TIVERTON TOWN 1-0 RUGBY TOWN

BGB Southern League Premier Division

How fitting it was that the day the RBS Six Nations tournament kicked off Tiverton Town would find themselves playing Rugby. No egg-chasing for the Yellows, however, but a crucial six pointer (that'll be two drop-goals) in the mid-table scrum that has slowly been developing in the Southern League. Rugby Town, The Valley, are one of few teams that have been able to overcome the elements and keep up-to-date with their fixture schedule, and that meant that whichever team took the spoils at Ladysmead would have a distinct advantage over the other with a little under three months of the season remaining.

Tiverton's advantage was familiarity - the bonus of playing at home in front of their own supporters, but that was almost squandered with barely two minutes on the clock when David Staff curled an effort goalwards from the edge of the area. Ray Johnston in the Tiverton goal initially appeared to be involved in a re-run of Cheshunt's opening strike a week earlier but dived low to his left at the last moment to palm the ball around the upright and out for a corner. It wasn't long before the Yellows found their feet on the heavy pitch and Stephan Morley was forced to head Chris Vinnicombe's teasing cross behind before Radley Veale nodded the resultant corner straight at Simon Lynn in the Rugby goal.

Tom Gardner then saw his header comfortably saved and Simon Bochenski powered a volley just wide of the mark as Tivvy continued to make the running, and with Veale proving a constant thorn in the Valley side it looked a certainty that the home side would soon edge into the lead. The dynamic midfielder headed Bochenski's cross over the top and then two minutes later crashed another effort off the woodwork with Lynn well beaten as the Yellows dominated the forward momentum. By the half-hour mark more chances had gone begging and Rugby found themselves clinging on to parity; Lynn beat Matt Bye to James Fraser's through-ball by fractions, Bochenski saw his attempt well saved at point blank range after some fine interplay involving Veale and Chris Young and Tom Gardner was denied by the excellent positioning on the goal line of Aaron Stringfellow, with Tom's namesake Will only being able to stab the follow-up wide from three yards.

With the game only moving in one direction the Yellows eventually made the breakthrough approaching half time. Young and Bochenski combined down the left flank and the former hit the by-line and cut back a low cross to the edge of the goal area which sat up perfectly for the onrushing Veale to side-foot into the net. It was a lead that Tiverton deserved and a lead that should have been doubled a few minutes before the interval but Matt Villis missed a 'gimme' from no yards, and the first period ended with a speculative effort from Veale from distance that Lynn was able to field with ease.

After such a dominant and free-flowing first forty-five minutes it was perhaps inevitable that the second half would degenerate into a less inspiring three quarters of an hour of entertainment, and Tivvy were certainly far less in the ascendancy once play resumed. Veale was once again in the thick of the action, this time a less than inspired loose pass was intercepted by Staff but the Rugby winger's shot was taken with little fuss by Johnston, and soon enough the action moved the length of the field again with Town searching for a second goal.

Young picked up on an exquisite threaded ball from Chris Vinnicombe but with the goal at his mercy he failed to get a shot away, and after the visitors had reshuffled with a double substitution Bochenski saw an audacious lob - straight out of the Eric Cantona book of cheekiness - dip agonisingly too late and onto the roof of the net. For long periods thereafter Rugby were able to get a hold on proceedings and dominated both possession and territory without ever genuinely threatening to grab an equaliser, although Dave Pearson was unlucky to see Tom Gardner bravely block a powerful effort and the luckless striker then skied the rebound.

The introduction of David Stone and Steve Evans had breathed new life into Rugby and the pair combined in a fast-moving counter attack but Scott Musgrove ended the advance by lifting his shot well over the crossbar as the Tiverton defensive line held firm and reduced the Warwickshire outfit to a series of speculative long-range efforts. Stringfellow failed to make the most of Rugby's best chance of the second half as he hit the ball wide after Will Gardner had rallied to scramble the ball out of the goal area twice in quick succession, and Staff once again got too much upward purchase on a shot with three minutes left to play.

Glenn Gould was introduced late on for Tiverton, marking his seventeenth birthday with his twenty-second appearance in a Town jersey; a substitution enforced when Bye pulled up in discomfort with a tight hamstring, and in added time Tiverton should have doubled the margin of victory but Bochenski dwelt on the ball to long with Tom Knighton wide open on the penalty spot. The forwards indecisiveness proved to be inconsequential, though, as the game was brought to what many observers would have considered a premature end, and on the balance of play Tiverton certainly deserved the three points, points which could prove crucial in a few months.

As a matter of interest this game saw in action the two players with the most minutes of Southern League football behind them this season - Chris Vinnicombe has now completed 2610 minutes in the league, while Rugby's Aaron Stringfellow has the same total, both players having started and completed 29 matches.

Tiverton Town: Ray Johnston; Danny O'Brien, Chris Vinnicombe, Matt Villis, Will Gardner, Tom Gardner, Matt Bye (Glenn Gould 88), Chris Young (Tom Knighton 66), Simon Bochenski, James Fraser, Radley Veale

Goals: Veale 38

Booked: Bye 17

Sent Off: None

Rugby Town: Simon Lynn; Aaron Stringfellow, Stephan Morley, Craig Herbert, Delroy Gordon, Scott Musgrove, Willis Francis (Tom Breward 30), Richard Scott (Steve Evans 58), Dave Pearson, Dave Kolodynski (David Stone 58), David Staff

Booked: Scott 27, Breward 40

Sent Off: None

Attendance: 398