

Outside the Bay

An offbeat look at the world of North East football inside & outside of Hillheads. . . with our international correspondent Paul Benneworth



Former rivals battling into the National League can inspire Whitley Bay fans

The Northern League is inextricably bound up with the North East England, and the North East England is a region with a very strong sense of regional identity.

It's partly helped by being surrounded on all sides by other strong regional identities, whether the Scots to the

North or the Tykes to the south.

Although Harry Pearson reminds us that much of Teesside looks more naturally to the south, there is only one Northern League team today that hails from the county of Yorkshire, namely Northallerton.

Although teams in the north east are fierce rivals for Whitley Bay when in the same league, that strong sense of regional identity means that I always look out for them cropping up elsewhere.

When I was a child, the 4.30pm videprinter was a staple of Saturday afternoon TV, and I always felt a sense of familiarity when a north eastern side was mentioned, and felt good if they won.

The usual suspects of Newcastle, Sunderland and Middlesbrough were regularly to be seen, and that meant there was a special buzz when the more unusual North Eastern teams featured.

I remember the first time I saw Blyth Spartans on Final Score. I was completely shocked. I knew Blyth from the 308 bus, but I can't say that I'd every knowingly been there. For my eight-year old self it was so exciting, a local town on a national TV show being watched by millions.

The world may have moved on from the videprinter to rolling sports news channels that talk about the scores and the tables 24/7. But my childish buzz from seeing the local teams on the national news channels remains. Part of it these days, it sometimes comes with a bitter-sweet.

The region's lower ranked professional sides have gone through some real tribulations the last twenty years, and have sometimes found themselves falling quite hard.

The league table for National League North is shown quite regularly on Sky Sports News. Gateshead have spent my entire life yo-yoing around what's now the National League and its feeders. Last season they came so close to reaching the playoffs to finally return to the EFL after a sixty year absence.

That came after a run battling against the odds to just fall short of the play-offs with a skeleton squad resulting from serial mismanagement that would see them instead relegated a division further away from the League.

But under the new fan ownership, they have bounced back well this season, are on an impressive run of form, with 11 points from the last five games, and have a chance of getting that promotion.

Three places below them are Darlington, a team that a decade ago were doing quite well in the lower reaches of the Football League but whose sudden implosion saw them condemned to the Northern League.

There was something inherently unfair about their comeback season, 2012-13, because they spoiled the competition for the rest of us. At the time Whitley Bay was at the height of its Treble Winning Vase glory, and the previous years had been vying for promotion.

Darlington blew the competition away that season, winning 40 of their 46 matches, a record promotion repeated the following season. NLN seems to be their level, going well, in touch with the play-off places but needing an excellent run of form to be in with a chance of going up.

Perched in between Darlington and Gateshead at the moment are Spennymoor Town. Fan-led like Gateshead and Darlington, the club was formed in 2005 by a merger of two troubled teams, and took its place in Northern League 2. Spennymoor were a strong rival for Whitley Bay in the early 2010s, and as we slightly stuttered, they powered ahead, winning promotion to Northern Premier League and then upwards twice again. They're showing similar form to Gateshead, and barring mishaps should be in with a shout.

It must have been a slow news night for them to be showing the Northern Premier League table on Sky last Thursday, but when they did, two familiar names leapt out at me.

I still think of Morpeth Town as a tough fixture, but I guess we haven't played them for a few seasons now. Tenth and table in the NPL, nine points off promotion.

But the real eye catcher there is South Shields – six years ago battling relegation in Northern League Div 2, now in the automatic promotion slot to NLN and looking imperious. Their story is quite well known, a new owner, ambition, hiring Julio Arca on a gate-share deal, FA Vase, and now on the verge of the National League.

And that's what's makes this all so exciting. South Shields are there now, and over five years it could be us, Whitley Bay, on the verge of greatness. Maybe not, but we can always dream!

Paul