

Outside the Bay

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

Derby Day drama a reminder of the Northern League's poetry



I was out for a matchday run in Bergen last year when it happened. Jogging past the open stadium of local football club SK Djerv, I spotted their striker played inside by a precision through ball. With just the keeper to beat, it was a dead cert goal. But then he skied it.

I was outraged, and I wasn't even following the game. But! It's what strikers are paid to do (although I am not sure the wages at Djerv would pay for many post-match pints), and if he couldn't finish it off, he shouldn't be wearing the shirt!

I had exactly the same rush of emotions earlier this season at Hillheads, at a game I was paying rather more attention to. Whitley were playing Newcastle University in the Senior Cup. Bay were 1-0 up and on 6 minutes, Brad Hird was played through.

With just the keeper to beat, he somehow contrived to miss. I was temporarily furious! If he couldn't score that kind of goal, then what kind of striker was he?!

I had the answer to my rhetorical question 35 minutes later when Hird completed his brace as we romped out 6-0 winners against a poor University side. But in those few seconds between the ball being played and the striker fluffing his chance, I'd constructed a whole complex narrative and judgement about what should happen in those circumstances.

And that's the beauty of football, in offering via a straightforward pastime, something that produces engaging narratives across a range of time spans.

Those timespans might be at the level of the split second, a striker missing a sitter, to the intrigues of coming and going in a season, to the ebbs and flows of fortunes as teams rise and slide through the leagues.

That capacity to produce narratives is one of the reasons that sports – and notably in the North East England football – is such a fertile conversation topic.

That also made it a rich vein of material for football writers showing links between events on and off the field, and the wider lives of the communities from which those teams spring.

Harry Pearson is in my mind one of the greatest exponents of this, and I make no apologies for recommending once more his *The Far Corner* as providing a deep insight into North Eastern culture recording his spending every Saturday for a season visiting non-league football matches.

One of the greatest narratives around football games is

that of the Derby game. Although the term's origins are hotly contested, matches between local rivals have the potential to stir the blood in a way that few other matches can.

And one of the most potent of those rivalries is between Newcastle United and Sunderland, itself reflecting a profound antagonism between those two once-proud industrial cities.

The NUFC-S AFC derby game has been reduced by Sunderland's travails into an occasional cup clash, but the rivalry is deeply imprinted on local football fans.

And it was another local writer, Dan Jackson (@northumbriana), who Tweeted last weekend about the Tyne & Wear Derby game playing out in our own Northern League, between North Shields and Sunderland RCA.

RCA have their own Norwegian-Whitley Bay connection of course, from this season's October away game. The RCA crowd of 212 was boosted by a substantial contingent from Oslo, who'd booked flights hoping to see the Black Cats play.

But when Sunderland's Fleetwood Town fixture was cancelled because of international duties, the Vikings chose RCA as a fitting alternative for a footballing minibreak, and were able to enjoy an eight goal thriller with Bay running out 6-2 winners.

Last Saturday, after watching the latest chapter of NUFC's own peculiar decline via the 1-1 FA Cup draw to Rochdale, I hopped on the Metro to North Shields. The last time I'd been to the Daren Persson stadium was for a balmy springtime evening fixture against Whitley that Shields had won 3-1.

The weather conditions were altogether more grim as the high-flying Robins took the field to a team who started the day just below Whitley in the League table.

The Robins had the run of play in the first half, but in extremely blustery conditions couldn't quite find the way into the net.

At the break, RCA came out and absolutely battered North Shields, scoring three goals before the home side found a way to stem the relentless pressure and mounted a late and ultimately futile fightback. It finished 3-1 to RCA, in a game that the crowd agreed had largely failed to live up to its derby day promise.

For Dr. Jackson, all to be written of the day was a brief remark on banter between trainer and referee, and most importantly his satisfying post-match drink in North Shields' newly-opened Enigma Tap.

So I likewise raise my glass, and say all the best to you, readers, for a prosperous and sporting 2020!