

TT No.012: 24/01/05 Club/Ground Focus: *Mike Latham* - TNS (Welsh Premier League)

TNS v Rhyl; highlight of the weekend in Wales was the Welsh Premier League clash between the first and third-placed clubs, Total Network Solutions and Rhyl at Treflan. TNS play in the tiny mid-Wales village of Llansantffraid, between Oswestry and Welshpool just off the A583 and about 18 miles west of Shrewsbury. With a population of around 1,000 the village must be one of the smallest in Europe to host a senior side. The club's name was sponsored by a company specialising in computer networks and they hit the headlines when they played Manchester City in the Uefa Cup in 2003, losing 0-7 on aggregate. TNS's "home" game was staged at the Millennium Stadium. TNS are full-time and are rumoured to pay some of their players wages that would at least match those on offer in the lower reaches of the Football League. Their manager is ex-Tranmere striker Ken McKenna and they train on the Wirral, travelling to Treflan for games. Rhyl stole TNS's thunder in 2003/4, winning the league for the first time and developing their support in the north Wales coastal resort. Their Belle Vue ground is now one of the best in Wales.

The two rivals met on a cold but sunny January Sunday afternoon with the game telecast live on Welsh Channel 4 television. The ground is reached via a steep road from the main road leading through the village and entry is via two turnstiles. Entrance was a mere £5 with a superb colour programme selling for £2- though this sold out with 25 minutes to go to kick-off. Once inside the welcome was warm- a clubhouse accessible to both home and away fans and open all day, a well-stocked snack-bar with pies, home-made rolls and fresh coffee and a superb club shop with a variety of souvenirs.

The ground is a fascinating mix of old and new- the new cantilevered stand behind one goal offering an impressive backdrop to the play while the old main stand, hewn into the wooded valley side was packed with fans. Behind the other goal a wire mesh fence stopped the ball disappearing into the fields behind. The Rhyl fans had occupied that end in the first-half as their team attacked, and hung three impressively large and colourful flags on the wire meshing.

When their team changed ends at half-time, they left the flags where they were and at the end of the game there was the sight of TNS fans helping them dismantle the flags from their position- can you imagine that happening in the Premier League? The game was well-contested, sporting and skilful on the well-grassed pitch, TNS twice falling behind in the second half and fighting back on each occasion. They salvaged a 2-2 draw with a close-range goal from striker Michael Wilde in the third minute of injury time.

The game drew a crowd of 1,042- a league record for TNS- with ground-hoppers from far and wide attracted by the unusual kick-off time. The writer spoke to

hoppers who had come from such diverse locations as Redditch, Dover, Bromley, Blackpool, Glasgow, Stockholm, Hull and Newcastle as he walked around the well-manicured ground. Great game- one to lift the spirits- and a fitting result for two teams set to take the championship race, just as they did last season, to the last day. WebEd. Cheers Mike. A superb report!

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