

Aaron Moore

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A SPRINKLE OF MAGIC



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Non-League
Clubs in the
FA Cup

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Non-League Clubs
in the FA Cup



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Bath City

A DEFEAT to Dover Athletic a week before Bath City's bow in the 2009/10 FA Cup wasn't the result they had hoped for. Their start to their Conference South season had been inconsistent, hampered by a lengthy injury list.

A narrow defeat to Chelmsford City on the opening day was out of their minds as they went three unbeaten in the games that followed – wins over Maidenhead United and Welling United at home before drawing away to Havant & Waterlooville. Those seven points remained their best run before their FA Cup tie with Willand Rovers as they followed the draw at Havant with just seven points in seven games. Their first home

loss came at the hands of Hampton & Richmond before two further draws, against Dorchester Town and Worcester City, and their only win in that run, a 5-1 victory over Bishop's Stortford, were followed by defeats to Eastleigh and Dover, either side of a draw at home to Lewes. The importance of a good start to their FA Cup run had become apparent as October approached.

'Supporters know that a good cup run can kick-start a season. It had been five years since we reached the proper stages of the FA Cup and in 2008, we blew a decent chance of a run with a third qualifying round defeat at home to Aylesbury United, which saw manager Josh Relish resign. Our defeat to Dover, where we only had four substitutes including assistant manager Lee Howells making up the numbers and equalised in the 90th minute, but still managed to lose, wasn't the ideal confidence booster ahead of our cup run,' recalled Mark Stillman, the club's radio presenter.

The Conference South season was 11 games old when Step 2 sides were entered into the FA

Cup, but Bath faced a 134-mile round trip to Western League Premier Division side Willand. Willand had started their run right at the start, the extra preliminary round, and had battled past Street FC, Falmouth Town, and Poole Town to reach the second qualifying round, but like all other Step 2 sides, Bath had to be patient and entered the competition at the end of September.

The gap between the two sides meant Bath were seen at the favourites to progress, but the fact Willand had already come through three games and played in a very competitive league didn't make a difference to how Mark felt ahead of the game,

'I personally find these games nerve-wracking. While the gap is large, Willand have finished in the top six of their division in the previous four seasons and had that winning habit. The Western League had always been a strong league for Step 5 – a lot of clubs would refuse promotion because of the excessive travelling so in some cases, you would be playing a team that should be much closer than expected.'

BATH CITY

Bath recorded their biggest win of the season against their lowly opponents, beating them 5-0. The start of the game had been a bit rocky and Willand had almost found themselves ahead as Tom Stocco headed a good chance over. Their first real attack got Bath off the mark as a brave header from Darren Edwards put them ahead. The second goal, in the 34th minute, seemed a moment of magic when Florin Pelecaci volleyed the ball home from 25 yards out for his only goal for the club. That was the first goal in an 11-minute spell – Edwards netted his ninth and tenth of the season including a penalty to complete his hat-trick and Kaid Mohamed netted his 15th of the campaign for the Romans. While it was the result that had been expected by many going into the game, the Romans were straight back to league action, travelling to Newport County.

‘Some fans had grown a bit impatient in the second half that we hadn’t heaped more misery on a clearly beaten side playing with a man down, but with the focus clearly to avoid more knocks to help

get our league campaign back on track, changes had been made,' said Mark.

The game in South Wales had ended in a narrow defeat. The victory for the Exiles had sent them to the top of the table, making it an important win, but City could have been forgiven if their mind remained elsewhere as they had been drawn in the FA Cup against another side from the league below, Bishop's Cleeve.

Bishop's Cleeve played in the Southern League Division One South & West, a level higher than Bath's previous opponents, but City still remained the favourites. The Mitres had beaten Reading Town, Brockenhurst, and Conference South side Weymouth in the preceding rounds, giving them the confidence they could beat a fourth team on their own FA Cup journey. The wins over Reading and Brockenhurst had been routine against opponents from Step 6 of the National League System, but the scalp of Weymouth had slightly worried Mark. The Terras struggled that season and had found themselves towards the bottom end

of the table, but the win for Bishop's Cleeve wasn't one people had expected.

Mark said, 'Cleeve actually looked like an easier tie on paper than Willand as they weren't setting the world alight in the Southern League, but their recent FA Cup record was good for a side at their level and they had knocked out Weymouth from our league, so we knew they would have had their tails up. Another nagging doubt for us was at the same stage in the previous season [2008/09], we had lost to [Step 4] Aylesbury United.'

In the four seasons before 2009/10, Bath had only reached the fourth qualifying round in one of them. The 2005/06 season had come to an end in the third qualifying round after a narrow 1-0 defeat to Weymouth, while their run in the following campaign had lasted a round fewer, with the Romans being defeated by Merthyr Tydfil in the second qualifying round after a 0-0 draw at home.

The 2007/08 FA Cup had been the nearly run. Wins over Truro City and Newport in the second

and third qualifying rounds had led Bath to within one win of the first round proper, but despite being handed a favourable home tie, Torquay United proved too strong, edging it 2-0, then 2008/09 saw City eliminated in the third qualifying round.

There were no repeats of previous seasons when coming up against Bishop's Cleeve as another double by Edwards, with a goal from the spot, as well as a brace for Mark Badman made it another comfortable afternoon for Bath.

They could have fallen behind early in the game as Marcus Browning nearly put the ball into his own net inside a minute. The similarities to the Willand game continued when they opened the scoring with their first real attack, an Edwards penalty after quarter of an hour, and two quickfire goals from Badman just before half-time saw them effectively kill off the tie in the first half. Kevin Slack pulled one back for the hosts, but a looping header from Edwards took his tally to five in two cup games and gave Bath a spot in the next round. It was another result

people had expected, but another game that could have been sticky.

The 4-1 victory meant it was two fourth qualifying round appearances for Bath in five years.

The feat would usually be enough to get anyone excited, but Mark was still wary. Getting too excited too early would only leave him disappointed.

‘Our club had suffered too many fourth qualifying round defeats to know it was too early to get excited,’ he explained. ‘I believe no one else had lost at this stage more than us, so we wanted a favourable draw and compared to who we could have been paired with, our luck was in.’

The final qualifying round offered another challenge to Bath City. Conference Premier sides entered the competition, with the likes of AFC Wimbledon, Luton Town, Cambridge United, Mansfield Town, Crawley Town, Oxford United and Stevenage Borough making up seven of the top ten teams in the division. Mark had hoped

to avoid any of these sides, at least until they had reached the first round proper.

The draw had offered its blessing over Bath as they avoided all of those top-level opponents. With the likes of Altrincham, Grays Athletic and Thurrock being drawn against Mansfield, Luton and Oxford respectively, the Romans faced their second Southern League South & West side, AFC Totton. Their opponents for the final qualifying round had started way back in the preliminary round, getting wins over Chichester City, VCD Athletic, Almondsbury Town and Bridgwater Town, making them a team who knew how to win.

Bath had beaten Basingstoke Town at home in a seven-goal thriller a week before their huge game against the Stags, giving them confidence for their huge game, but it hadn't eased the nervousness felt across the club. Totton had scored 15 and conceded just four in their four FA Cup games up to that point, meaning Bath had to play their best football to progress.

‘On the day of the Totton game, I was nervous and a lot more critical of the players than normal for any mistake, but the scoreline doesn’t do it [our performance] justice,’ said Mark.

‘Football, however, isn’t always straightforward. Nathan Jack and Jaime Whisken scored late on for Totton, and they had a valid claim for a penalty turned down. By the end, we were clinging on to win it, but it should have been a lot easier. I needed a few drinks on the night to mark the occasion – I remember drunkenly texting manager Adie Britton late on – and was hoping for a good draw the following afternoon.’

Bath had had an early escape when Ryan Robinson, making his long-awaited debut having picked up an injury before pre-season, kept them in the game with an early parry. The hosts then turned the screw and found themselves two ahead in quick succession, Richard Evans and Adam Connolly scoring with smart strikes before the game was all but done with a third just after the half-time break. Gethin Jones’s header extended

the lead, with Bath in total control and Evans later hitting the bar.

Although they had dominated, Bath had seemingly scraped through to the first round proper, but that was all that mattered. They were in the draw alongside League One and Two sides who were added to the mix when the proper rounds rolled around.

Bath were drawn out of the hat early on; after an all-League One tie between Gillingham and Southend United, the Romans were drawn away to Grimsby Town. Having seen their team come out early, they could sit back and enjoy the remainder of it. The 2009/10 FA Cup first round proper didn't disappoint; Conference Premier sides Gateshead and AFC Wimbledon were drawn against League One Brentford and Millwall respectively, while fellow Conference North and South teams AFC Telford United and Northwich Victoria were pulled out of the hat at home, Telford to League Two Lincoln City and the Vics welcoming Charlton Athletic of League

One. Elsewhere, Tooting & Mitcham United of the Isthmian League Premier Division travelled to tier-three side Stockport County, and Southern League Paulton Rovers welcomed Norwich City, who had been relegated from the Championship the previous season.

Mark was happy with the draw, 'It was a mixed reaction. When we previously reached the first round, the draw was made within an hour of a win over Leatherhead and was met with deflation as we landed Barnet away [and while it worked out well], this time we had the night to enjoy our achievement. I was happy with the draw for the geeky reason that it was a new ground to take in and a change from the tedious trawls along the M25 in our league. The club didn't say much about it but along the road Paulton Rovers had landed a plum television draw against Norwich City. That suited me.'

Before their tie with Grimsby, on 7 November 2009, Bath had to navigate their way through two league games. Three days after their win over AFC

Totton they were back on the road, winning 2-0 against strugglers Weymouth, before being held at home by Bromley. The two unbeaten games kept their run of five without a loss going, giving them good form at the right time.

Grimsby were struggling at the wrong end of the League Two table. Having begun their season with three straight losses, the Mariners picked up their first victory of the season away to Bury. That couldn't kick-start a good run as they faced a further two defeats, losing to Aldershot Town and Port Vale before their best form of their season saw them pick up seven points; wins over Hereford United and Torquay United and a draw against Darlington. As they approached their bow in the FA Cup, Grimsby faced five losses and a draw. The five consecutive defeats, to Chesterfield, Barnet, Burton Albion, Rochdale and AFC Bournemouth, were followed by a 2-2 draw away to Accrington Stanley. The poor start had given Bath the belief they could get something from the game, despite being seen as underdogs.

BATH CITY

'I was happy to play the role of the underdog for the first time in the run. Grimsby had made a poor start and had just sacked [manager] Mike Newell. I wouldn't say I thought we'd get the win, but I knew if we played well and they weren't on it, we stood a good chance,' said Mark.

Being the underdogs didn't mean much to Bath as they came away with a 2-0 victory. Grimsby had barely troubled the non-league side, with their best chance coming in the ninth minute when Barry Conlon met a cross from Jammal Shahin but headed his effort over the bar. Edwards almost put Bath ahead when he burst through the Mariners' defence, but the keeper raced out to save at his feet. Chris Holland netted his first in the FA Cup as he headed in a perfectly delivered set piece ball from Lewis Hogg before the score was doubled, Edwards picking up a loose ball and seeing his shot deflected out of reach of the keeper.

'We were better than Grimsby on the day. We had raised our levels, and their confidence

evaporated. [Adie] Britton said he thought we'd win, and that confidence rubbed off, with us scoring either side of half-time,' Mark explained before he continued, 'By this stage [being 2-0 ahead], I knew we wouldn't lose, but I thought there would be a rally from our League Two hosts. Our supporters who had left Bath, some at 6am, were rewarded for their loyalty and I shan't forget Grimsby fans applauding them and the players. It showed real class.'

Bath had made up a third of the lowest-ranked sides remaining in the competition at the second round proper stage. Fellow Conference South side Staines Town and Conference North outfit Northwich Victoria had made it a trio of Football League giant-killings, beating Shrewsbury and Charlton respectively, both 1-0.

Mark said, 'I watched the draw at the club with a lot of our expectant fans. There was a huge roar as we landed a home draw we wanted, and a more favourable one with it being Mansfield Town or Forest Green.'

BATH CITY

Bath had been handed a home tie with against Conference Premier opposition, the two teams having drawn 1-1 in their first match. Forest Green were fighting towards the top of the table and Mansfield were in mid-table. Unlike Northwich, who drew Lincoln City at home, and Staines, who would travel to east London to face Millwall, Bath had missed out on facing another Football League side, making it a disappointing draw for the Stillmen.

‘Personally, I wasn’t too pleased [with the draw],’ Mark said. ‘I knew we’d missed the chance at a televised tie, and it might have not generated much interest in playing another non-league side, even with the potential of one being fairly local.’

Regardless of how Mark felt about the draw, it had been made. While they were competing for promotion from Conference South, there was an obvious distraction to the upcoming FA Cup game. The Grimsby fixture had been followed by a draw on the road against Staines before Bath added another three points with victory over

Chelmsford City at home. Their league form had picked up, going unbeaten in five games, but a week before facing Forest Green – who had seen off Mansfield in their replay – they faced defeat in the FA Trophy to Maidenhead United.

‘Maidenhead United were a side we had a real stranglehold over otherwise, and apparently, Britton’s final words were “whatever you do, don’t you dare draw”. There was no worry of a replay as we lost 1-0 to a late soft goal,’ said Mark.

The potential replay in the FA Trophy would have fallen four days before Bath’s FA Cup tie, giving them less preparation time and the possibility of having tired players, so the loss to Maidenhead was a blessing in disguise with the teams still drawing late on. As the days ticked away, Mark became surprised with the interest in their second round proper encounter,

‘I don’t remember a huge build-up [to the Rovers tie], but everyone was aware of it approaching. My prediction of “not much interest” for the game was bang wrong and we suddenly had about eight

companies wanting to sponsor the match and had to create extra pages in the programme for adverts. I had become the programme editor that season, taking over from my dad who had previously edited it, so alongside a full-time job, I found it incredibly stressful.'

When the tie had finally arrived on 28 November 2009, Mark was surprised with how busy Twerton Park had become. Upon arriving at the ground to fulfil his PA announcement duties, he eventually squeezed his car into an empty spot before rushing into the press box, which was heaving. It had become apparent he would be announcing his biggest crowd to date – 3,325.

Despite the huge crowd getting behind the team, the game ended in defeat, bringing Bath's FA Cup journey to an end. Forest Green had taken the lead in unfortunate circumstances as Jonathan Smith's long-range effort was deflected beyond Ryan Robinson in the Bath goal by Jim Rollo, before City were level ahead of half-time when ex-Forest Green player Sekani Simpson saw his cross

sent into the net by a fine Lewis Hogg header. Within four minutes of the second half starting, Mark Preece nodded Rovers ahead. City had taken the club on a journey that they could be proud of, but it was still disappointing to have exited when they did.

‘We huffed and puffed but it was one game too many. It would have been more disappointing if we had squandered a lot of chances or the game was decided by a poor decision,’ Mark explained. ‘From memory, neither happened – we didn’t play particularly well, and I think the nerves got to the players. Jim Rollo later said to me that it was the most nervous he’d been before a goal.

‘It was crushing to lose that close to the third round [proper] but there was some consolation as Forest Green’s reward was Notts County away. Had we missed out on a Premier League team, it would have been sickening.’

The prize money won during that run had some effect on the club as they bounced to promotion. When their FA Cup run had come to an end,

Bath sat tenth in Conference South, mid-table and looking up at the teams in the play-offs. A steady run of 11 points in seven games, beginning with a bounce back 5-0 victory over Woking on Tuesday, 1 December, saw them moved between eighth, ninth and tenth. Their form picked up as they went nine unbeaten, rising to their highest position of third in the league, but three consecutive losses against Hampton & Richmond, Braintree Town and Basingstoke Town meant they dropped back down to eighth with just six games left.

Mark said, 'I don't recall us suddenly splashing out on stand-out players. The money helped cover up from the previous season's embarrassing exit and probably supported us behind the scenes more than anything else. The run seemed to benefit more as it brought the players together and we ground out a lot of games to win promotion via the play-offs [setting up Conference National fixtures against Forest Green and Grimsby – who would be relegated from League Two – for the next campaign].'

The final six games of the season saw Bath go unbeaten, winning five consecutively against Dorchester Town, Worcester City, Staines, Bromley, and Lewes before ending the season with an anti-climactic 0-0 at home to St Albans. The 16 points from six games had lifted the club to fourth, qualifying them for the post-season play-offs.

Bath faced third-placed Chelmsford City in the semi-finals while Dover Athletic, who had finished as runners-up, welcomed Woking in the other tie after they pipped Havant & Waterlooville and Braintree to the final play-off spot by a single point. Chelmsford had dominated the first half, but a penalty from Kaid Mohamed and a goal for Hector Mackie, his only one in 2009/10, had given Bath a 2-0 victory at home in the second half. They had followed that win with a narrow 1-0 victory in the second leg, with Mohamed netting again, and setting up a play-off final at home to Woking. The Cardinals had overcome all the odds to beat Dover in the other semi-final, with their

2-1 first-leg win enough to send them through after a goalless draw in the return.

Over 4,000 spectators descended on to Twerton Park, more than both of their ties in the 'proper' rounds of the FA Cup, snaking their way from the turnstiles all the way down Twerton High Street, meaning kick-off had to be delayed. A penalty in the 56th minute, scored by man-of-the-moment Mohamed, had been enough to seal promotion to Conference Premier despite an onslaught of pressure by their opponents, with the final whistle being met with joy and delight among the home supporters.