

## Remember the Spartans by Stuart Fuller

The name Blyth Spartans may not mean much to the younger football fan, but the Northern Premier League side are one of the most successful Non-League clubs in the history of the FA Cup. Whilst Lewes can look back on a few forays into the First Round proper, including the memorable trip back in November 2001 to play Stoke City, Blyth Spartans have reached the first round 32 times in their 114 year history which is an amazing achievement and going onto the 3rd round on four occasions, the most recent being in 2009 when they lost 1-0 to Blackburn Rovers.

But it is the amazing exploits of the 1977/78 FA Cup campaign that made them a household name up and down the country. In that season they entered the competition in the 1st qualifying round in mid-September, dispatching Shildon in a local derby 3-0. Another local tie in the next round saw them up against Crook Town who took Spartans to a replay. The next two round draws saw them get further local ties against Consett and Bishop Auckland, both defeated to put them into the hat for the First Round Proper.



Once again lady luck was at the FA when the draw was made and part-timers Burscough were drawn out at home, with a single goal enough to take them into Round Two where they met

Chesterfield. Whilst they had ridden their luck to get to this stage, there was no fluke about the win versus the Division Two side at Croft Park. With the draw for the Third Round made on the Monday following the Second Round, the squad met at the ground and huddled round the radio hoping to get a plum draw. At first there was delight that they were drawn at home, but soon that turned to disappointment when the ball of Enfield was drawn. Whilst the game would prove to be a real test for Blyth Spartans as Enfield were one of the best Non-League sides in the country, they knew they had missed out on a money-spinning game.

But a single goal from Alan Shoulder was enough to take them into Round Four where they would meet Stoke City. Now the footballing nation was sitting up and taking notice of the part-timers from the North East. Unfortunately bad weather meant the game against the Potters at the old Victoria Ground was cancelled twice. To add more spice to the game, the draw for the Fifth Round saw the winner of this game paired against Newcastle United or Wrexham. To Spartans the dream of an away tie against many of the players heroes at St James' Park was a huge incentive to try and beat Stoke City.

Fans who couldn't get down to the Midlands for the finally re-arranged midweek game missed out on seeing one of the biggest FA Cup shocks in the competition's history. Stoke were a recent top-flight side, had won the League Cup just a few years earlier and had Howard Kendall, Terry Conroy, Alec Lindsay, Viv Busby and a young Garth Crooks up

front. Blyth took an early lead but two Stoke City goals seemed to have won the tie for the Potters. But the Spartans came back at them with an equaliser and then in the final seconds a free kick was turned in by Terry Johnson to take the Non-League club into the fifth round - only the second Non-League club to ever reach this stage of the FA Cup.

Once again, the dream of a tie against Newcastle United turned into a nightmare as they were stuffed 4-1 by Wrexham. But once again the Spartans didn't know the meaning of the word defeat and led in the game as it entered the final minute. With the BBC Match of the Day cameras recording the game for the Saturday night footballing nation, the impossible seemed as if it was about to be the reality. Alas, with the final throw of the dice, Wrexham equalised from a corner. However, Blyth would get their day out at St James' Park after all as Newcastle United offered up their ground for the replay. The winners would be hosting the mighty Arsenal.

So on Monday 27th February, some five and a half months since they kicked off their campaign against Shildon, Blyth Spartans kicked off against Wrexham in front of a sell-out 42,000 attendance. Though Blyth didn't play badly, Wrexham were 2-0 up in the 20th minute. No one gave up, though, not on the terraces, nor on the pitch; with eight minutes left Terry Johnson blasted in a volley. But despite some close calls, the equaliser would not come. The dream was over.

The £7-a-week part-time players each received £350 worth of bedroom furniture from a local business. Two of them earned dream moves down the road to Newcastle: centre-back Steve Carney and more famously Alan Shoulder, who adapted to life away from the Northern League well, scoring regularly for The Toon and Carlisle United.

Since Blyth's exploits, Telford United, Kidderminster Harriers, Crawley Town and last season, Luton Town have all reached the Fifth Round whilst still playing in the Non-Leagues. But none of those have played as many games in one campaign. The story of Blyth Spartans is one that gives hundreds of clubs up and down the country hope every single September when the road to Wembley opens.