

Yeovil aristocrats celebrate in appropriate style

Walter Gammie watches one of non-League football's most famous names mark a return to the Vauxhall Conference elite with an opening-day victory

THERE was a crackle of anticipation in the treacle-thick air at Huish Park on Saturday. It was charged not just by the relief that the long-drawn rituals of pre-season skirmishing were finally over, but by an eagerness to assess whether the teams will be able to scoop the substantial rewards that the Vauxhall Conference has to offer.

The Conference, reinvented as a league with a majority of clubs equipped for the Football League, is all about barging rivals out of the way to the one-team-at-a-time entrance to higher status. The prize is a big draw. A crowd of 3,602 testified to that, although supporters do not come more committed than those of Yeovil Town and Stevenage Borough, who shaded their hosts by an average 2,881 to 2,774 as the best-supported club outside the League last season.

The home contingent was, of course, celebrating the return of one of the old aristocracy of the non-League world to the elite after two wilderness years in the Icis League.

One need only look up the sepia-tint image of the great FA Cup win over Sunderland in 1949 to appreciate Yeovil's place in the game.

The slope that put fear into visiting professionals was levelled for super-market trolleys and Yeovil moved to their present stadium outside the town in 1990. It was the same season Wycombe Wanderers opened Adams Park. Any easy assumption that Yeovil would swiftly take the same route to the promised land disappeared into an abyss of a £750,000 debt incurred in the move.

The club has clawed its way back to stability and John Fry, the chairman, believes the appointment of Norman Hayward, the former chairman of Bournemouth, as a director will help to give Yeovil the additional muscle to fulfil the dream that he shares with the supporters.

Stevenage, by contrast, are new

boys on the block. Founded as a parks league club in 1976, their rapid subsequent advance has been fuelled by the commitment of the local council, the ambition of Victor Green, the chairman, and the energy and acumen of Paul Fairclough, the manager. Such is his side's reputation that, after an ordinary performance in defeat against understandably pumped-up opponents, Fairclough was questioned as if Stevenage had just suffered a rather larger calamity.

The side he built for the League, having been barred as champions because of ground-grading rules that the club's costly court appeal has since helped to relax and then been burnt out in pursuit of Macclesfield last season, has lost a backbone of players impatient to make the leap.

Fairclough hoped to replace Barry Hayles — whose sparkling start with

Bristol Rovers surprises the Stevenage manager not one bit — with Paul Thompson, from Gateshead, only for the £15,000 signing to break his ankle and damage ligaments against Cambridge United after 70 minutes and "two superb goals" of pre-season football.

The experienced Corey Browne walked out last Thursday to join Slough Town and Fairclough said: "I spent most of last week trying to find forwards. I have spent only £12,000 in six years previously, but £30,000 already this season. The likes of Hayles were found on street corners and needed a year before they were ready. We have got players coming through our youth scheme, but they will need another year. So, I will have to buy again."

The burden on Saturday fell on Neil Trebble, who worked manfully and crafted himself the space to angle

a fine equalising goal past Pennock just after half-time. Yeovil, meanwhile, revelled in the return to form and fitness of Patmore, whose challenge upon Gallagher created a simple opening goal for Pickard, a £15,000 signing from Dorchester Town, in the 24th minute. Patmore then crashed in a far-post header in the 76th minute after Engwell had tormented Marshall on the left to provoke a small pitch invasion from exuberant supporters.

"All credit to Graham Roberts, the manager," Fry said. "He runs the side very professionally. In fact, we might be semi-professionals, but I know we are a lot more professional than many of the clubs in the League at the moment." It is the small matter of who will get the chance to prove it that promises an absorbing nine months to come.

YEOVIL TOWN (3-5-2): A Pennock — A-J Hannigan, R Cousins, C White — L Harvey, C Fielder, S Browne (sub: S Wimbles, 81min), S Winter (sub: G Kemp, 45), M Engwell — W Patmore, O Pickard.
STEVENAGE BOROUGH (3-5-2): D Gallagher — R Kirby, W Kelly, R Trott — R Marshall, J Solomon, M Smith, S Beevor, J March — N Trebble, R Simpson (sub: E Elad, 56).
Referee: L Cable.