

Torquay settle for gallows humour

Torquay United 0
Hartlepool United..... 0

BY STUART JONES

THE conversation with Simon Garner was interrupted by an odd inquiry from an octogenarian. He wanted to know how many times he would have to run around the perimeter of the pitch to complete a marathon, the feat he had been sponsored to carry out before Torquay United's next home match.

"No idea," Garner replied, "but be careful." The 84-year-old intruder, clutching a photograph of himself competing in the London Marathon, asserted that he was capable of fulfilling the task. "I'm sure you'll be fine," the former Blackburn Rovers forward interjected, "but you might get picked for the team."

Garner could laugh at his own joke. At 36, he is no spring chicken himself. Nor, voraciously sucking on a cigarette, is he a walking advertisement of fitness. Yet he had been voted by the local sponsors as the man of a match during which he had operated only in sporadic bursts.

The occasion was desperate and not only for the 2,580 shivering spectators. Hartlepool United, presently rated as the fourth-worst side in the Endsleigh Insurance League, were reduced to ten men after 20 minutes and to nine after half-an-hour. Thereafter, they did not try to score. Torquay just could not.

Garner, as he reflected on the collective impotence, argued that the dismissals were "the worst thing that could

have happened". Once the appropriately named Reddish and Howard had been sent off, both for second cautionable offences, Hartlepool naturally recoiled into an unashamedly defensive posture, lashing clearances towards the distant corner flags.

Since Garner arrived, a month ago, Torquay had collected seven points but are still far adrift at the bottom of the league. After initially spouting the usual declarations of optimism, he could estimate the odds of avoiding relegation to the Vauxhall Conference as no higher than 50-50. "The games are starting to run out," he said, "and we can't afford even draws now."

The club has already been compared to Babbacombe Lee, an infamous West Country figure of the 19th century. A convicted murderer, he thrice escaped the gallows. Torquay, though, could be said to be facing their fourth trial. In the two years before relegation from the league was introduced, they finished bottom. The next year, 1987, the ultimate sanction was about to be imposed when Jim McNichol, their right back, was bitten by Bryn, a police alsation. In the time added on for his prolonged treatment, Torquay equalised against a Crewe Alexandra line-up featuring David Platt. The point gained condemned Lincoln City instead.

TORQUAY UNITED (4-4-2): R Newland — S Winter, L Barrow, A Watson, S Stamps — M Preston (sub: R Hancox, 65min), P Ramsey, C Oatway, I Hathaway (sub: T Kelly, 65) — P Baker, S Garner.

HARTLEPOOL UNITED (4-4-2): B Horne — S Reddish, D Henderson, I McGuckin (sub: G Lee, 34), S McCauley — C Lynch, S Howard, K Oliver, T Canham — J Allon (sub: P Conlan, 89), K Houchen.

Referee: M Bailey.