

Prenton promotes memorial cause

LEAGUE football returned to Merseyside last night as Tranmere Rovers, one of whose young hopefuls died at Hillsborough, moved back to the top of the Fourth Division by beating Stockport County.

After a rather flat hour, Ian Muir scored the only goal, his 26th of the season, with a free-kick worthy of Paul Gascoigne, extending to 10 matches an unbeaten run that was interrupted by the Liverpool tragedy. Tranmere, though, had been winning hearts as well as matches.

Traditionally overshadowed by the big clubs on the other side of the Mersey Tunnel, twice pulled back from the brink of extinction in the Eighties alone, they had made Prenton the place to be; their last Friday-night match, against Scunthorpe, had drawn 10,468 spectators, which made the

whole-country take notice. But a week ago, when the turnstiles should have been clicking again for the visit of Grimsby, the ground held a memorial service instead.

The players have been attending funerals. They formed a guard of honour for the coffin of Kevin Tyrrell, a schoolboy who had been due to play for the club's under-16 team at Carlisle on Saturday, 15 April; the match was cancelled, and Kevin went to Hillsborough. Widows of victims have been to the ground and told John King, the manager, that their husbands "would love us to go on and win promotion". It was not unusual for Wirral people, disenchanted by Tranmere's lack of success, to support Liverpool but keep a place in their hearts for the local club.

"I just hope we don't blow it

PATRICK BARCLAY on the emotional mission of Merseyside's third football force

now," said King. "That's not being insensitive. We are convinced the lads who died would have wanted us to pick up our heads, play with pride, and do it for the people of Merseyside."

King was born in Liverpool, like several of his team. This is his second spell as manager of the club, for which he made 239 League appearances as a wing-half and captain in the Sixties, and locals are pleased he is doing well. He guided Tranmere into the Third Division in 1976, with a team playing the same sort of progressive football that has raised admiring eyebrows lately. At times it seemed they might even be equipped for the Second (into which the club had struggled for just one chastening pre-war season).

But King was given no money to build and eventually lost his job. He went non-League, taking Northwich Victoria to Wembley twice, then agreed to assist Vic Halom at Rochdale: a gesture to a friend that led, once again, to the sack. The next offer came from Caernarfon Town. "I remember thinking something must be wrong — while everyone else's career was going up, mine kept going down." But he took Caernarfon to the third round of the FA Cup, which had never been done before, and two years ago the call came to return to Tranmere.

He consulted his wife, and tended to agree with her that "going back there wouldn't be worth the hassle" but someone else tipped him off that the club might

just be changing course at last, that convincing men, successful in business, had moved into the boardroom, ousting the San Francisco lawyer Bruce Osterman and his grandiose choice as manager, Frank Worthington.

King signed. Nine matches later he faced the prospect of going non-League again. Indeed the whole club did. Tranmere went into their final fixture needing to beat Exeter to avoid relegation to the GM Vauxhall Conference. But they won, before nearly 7,000. This raised the average crowd, 1,566 the previous season, to 2,126. Last season, when Tranmere finished just below halfway but earned themselves and their supporters a stimulating Wembley weekend at the centenary festival, it was 3,321. Now it is around 5,000 (last night's total was 6,270): a rise, over three years, of more than 200 per cent. Few clubs can match that.

Suddenly, instead of survival, people are talking of potential. The club may once have drawn support from shipyards and dockyards, but the wider Wirral hinterland has a population as great as Liverpool's, and more prosperous. They are being wooed by half-page advertisements in the local papers. "For the first time, the club are going out to them," said John Holsgrove, a director. "I have been a supporter all my life, and I cannot ever remember feeling, as everyone does now, that Tranmere Rovers are on the way up."

Neither he nor King has any doubt where the bulk of credit lies. Peter Johnson, who made his

money from selling food hampers, became chairman when Osterman was persuaded to relinquish control and transformed the atmosphere around Prenton Park. Nearly £1m was spent on improvements to the ground, which Osterman had tried to sell, and significant signings made: the striker Jim Steel and goalkeeper Eric Nixon, each time for club record fees, and midfielder Jimmy Harvey.

Meanwhile Muir, the great bequest of the Worthington era, has continued to score goals: one every other match over four seasons. Worthington remembered him from Birmingham, got him for nothing from Brighton, and envisaged making him part of a popular, entertaining team. That, in the roundabout way football has a habit of taking, is now happening.