

TT No.177: Stephen Harris - Istanbul Weekend (10 & 11 March 2007) featuring: Kisimpasa (2 Lig A); Fenerbahce and Galatasaray (both Super Lig).

The advent of Easy-jet flights from Luton to Istanbul has made this an exciting and affordable destination for the football traveller. The city has Turkey's three biggest clubs, a multitude of lower division clubs, and more tourist sights than you could possibly hope to squeeze in between fixtures. It is also refreshingly cheap. I had been long anticipating my first trip, and as I know it coincided with a visit by Leon Gladwell, I am anticipating two rival write-ups to appear on this website!

Saturday 10 March 2007; 2 Lig A; **Kasimpasa** 1-2 Ordu Spor. Att: c.1,200. Admission 5 YTL; No Programme; FGIF Match rating: 4*.

Our first game was in the second division at the city centre ground of Kasimpasa and what a great venue it is. Built on a steep hillside with views across the city, the spectator facilities consist of 10,000 seats in one perfectly proportioned stand which sweeps around one side and one end. The other two sides are off-limits. Players emerge from a modern building in one corner and there is an electronic scoreboard on the far side alongside a basketball court. The pitch is artificial, within a five-lane running track. All brand new-looking and very impressive for a club which, I confess, I had never even heard of two weeks ago.

Ordu had brought around 400 vociferous fans, segregated away at the far end, and the home team had a little choir of its own - so the game got underway to a good atmosphere despite the small overall size of the crowd. Kasimpasa looked good and scored early on. But they let it all slip, eventually losing 2-1 and losing a player to a red card late in the game. Although the sending off was fully justified, the referee was subjected to some serious abuse and needed to be escorted from the field at the end between shield-bearing riot police (we later discovered that this is routine at Turkish games).

Saturday 10 March 2007; Super Lig; **Fenerbahce** 3-0 Konyaspor. Att: c.35,000. Admission 27.50 YTL; No Programme; FGIF Match rating: 5*.

Following our enjoyable introduction to Turkish football at Kasimpasa, we crossed the Bosphorus to the Asian side to see top of the league Fenerbahce in an evening kick-off. In so doing, I can finally claim to have seen football in all the continents (except Antarctica of course). We had made efforts to get tickets in advance, but it was noticeable that they were for sale at the ferry terminal and also at the ground itself an hour before kick-off. The Sukru Saracoglu Stadi is without question one of the best I have been to. 45,000 seats in near identical two-tier stands, tight to the pitch-side on all four sides. The side stands have overhead heating (I've only seen this before at PSV Eindhoven) and there is a full range of executive facilities between the tiers.

By the time we got in it was not possible to get anywhere near our numbered seats and we found ourselves a spot towards the back. Away to our left was a segregated away section which seemed to be almost totally empty. Otherwise the ground was pretty full and there was a quite incredible atmosphere from all sides. I don't think I have been in a crowd anywhere which has produced such a sustained volume of noise. What must it be like here for a derby game? Everyone stood throughout and there was no distinction between seating areas and aisles. We felt rather underdressed not being kitted out in yellow and blue from head to toe.

Konya got off to a good start and we thought an upset might be on the cards but the Champions League pedigree of the home side started to show and they eventually won the game with something to spare. One of the goals was superb, three first touch passes (two were back-heals) and in. This was repeated endlessly on TV for the next two days. After the game it was enjoyable to get a "football special" ferry back to Old Istanbul with more football to look forward to the next day.

Sunday 11 March 2007; Super Lig; **Galatasaray** 2-1 Trabzonspor. Att: c.20,000. Admission 17 YTL; No Programme; FGIF Match rating 4*.

Sunday morning saw my companion setting off for a third division play-off league game at Sariyer, but I was unable to drag myself away from the delights of the Blue Mosque and the Topkapi Palace - possibly the first ever recorded instance of sightseeing interfering with my football. But we arranged to meet up in a bar in the early evening. I had been there for a while when my friend arrived, watching the TV in some horror as they showed graphic detail of some serious crowd trouble at that afternoon's match between Genclerbirligi and Besiktas. We watched in even more horror as the cameras went over live to Galatasaray to show what appeared to be a completely full stadium, some hour and a half before kick-off time. A ten-minute taxi dash later and we were at the back of a boisterous queue to get in to what proved to be a very lively Ali Sami Yen Stadi, otherwise known as 'Hell'.

We just about found a space at the back corner of the un-covered end terrace in what is quite an old-fashioned and clearly too-small stadium. It is little surprise that Gala are planning to move to larger and more modern facilities. Away to our right was a packed away section with perhaps 2,000 highly vociferous Trabzon fans, kitted out in a ghastly colour clash of claret and pale blue. The far end had a similar open terrace in two tiers. Either side has old-style, concrete, cantilevered stands in the club colours of yellow and red.

The hour leading up to kick off was spent in increasing discomfort, standing on our seats in the bitter cold. The crowd switched from nibbling away like mice on their roasted pumpkin seeds to leaping around like maniacs. Then the game started and we all sat down for four minutes of sober applause. This was a protest to the Turkish FA for making Gala play behind closed doors a few weeks ago. Last home game it lasted 2 minutes - next week it will be 6 minutes. As soon as the 4 minutes were up everyone sprang to their feet and it was full time leaping around like

maniacs and shouting until the final whistle. The atmosphere did not quite reach the heights of the game at Fenerbahce the previous evening, but this was more to do with the lack of a roof than for want of trying.

Gala took the lead but the game nearly swung when Trabzon were allowed a highly controversial equaliser in which the home 'keeper copped an elbow full in the face. This event was apparently the biggest thing to happen in Turkey that day as it was the main item on the TV news and repeated endlessly thereafter. Proper order was restored when the home team re-took the lead and held out to the end.

So overall a great weekend, and I'm already planning to go back in order to take in a game at Besiktas.

06/20