

**TT No.208: Mike Latham** - Sat 7 April 2007: Scottish League Division One. **Gretna** 0-2 St Johnstone. Attendance: 2,133; Admission: 314; 48pp programme: £2.50; FGIF Match Rating: 3\*.

Owen Coyle will one day have a special chapter to himself as a party-pooper in Gretna's great plan.

Fourteen years ago, I remember him scoring two late goals to give Bolton Wanderers a 3-2 victory over Gretna in an FA Cup-tie at Burnden Park and deny the Borderers a famous cup win.

Coyle is now manager of St Johnstone and has constructed an impressive side, one that not only lies in second place in the first division table but has also reached the semi-finals of the Scottish Cup.

Second that is to Gretna, whose astonishing rise through the Scottish Leagues has been well chronicled. The home side needed a win to guarantee their third successive promotion and a place in the SPL next season.

But Coyle again worked the oracle, giving his own team an outside chance of promotion. They won this game deservedly 2-0, both goals coming from their impressive Trinidad & Tobago internationalist, Jason Scotland.

Gretna's rise has been financed by the largesse of Brooks Mileson, an all-round good egg. Having made his money in insurance he has never forgotten his roots. Raised on a Sunderland council estate, he sponsors the Northern League in perpetuity and also runs an animal sanctuary so he is alright with me. Five years ago, Gretna were still playing in the Unibond League and their progress since, which includes an appearance in the 2006 Scottish FA Cup Final, could scarcely have been imagined.

Gretna's Raydale park ground has undergone massive changes as the foundations are laid for an-SPL compliant 6,000 all-seated stadium. By the entrance at the car-park end of the ground the terracing and shelter have been demolished and grass has been laid to move the pitch in order to accommodate the building of a new stand.

The tiny main stand, straddling the half-way line, is still there, as is the social club on pitch-side but the far side, behind the far goal now has a covered temporary stand, the type of which is used in the open golf tournaments while a covered standing area has also been constructed to the right of the main stand. Away fans are located, as before, in the shallow covered terrace running along the other the other side of the pitch, little more than an elongated bus shelter with a corrugated iron roof.

Despite the importance of the game the match is not all-ticket and a crowd of just over two thousand, higher than the town's population gathers in readiness of

seeing history in the making. The mood, on a beautiful sunny afternoon, is cheery and optimistic and the large visiting supports join in the general bonhomie. The playing pitch, a mass of verdant green, is simply superb.

A charge of £14 secures admission to the covered stand behind the goal where the view is superb and the leg-room second only to Bolton's luxurious Reebok Stadium. An outstanding full-colour programme full of interesting articles helps pass the time till kick-off and though the catering is from mobile vans it is of higher quality than at most grounds. There are lots of families and the children, all attired in replica Gretna kits, are excited and seem to realise the importance of the occasion. In many ways it's an old-fashioned type atmosphere- friendly and warm with not a hint of malice in the air- such a change to the often, poisonous air of the English Premiership.

But on one of the warmest days of the year so far Gretna freeze and Scotland's goals extend the waiting for at least another week. Despite making three half-time substitutions it's clear that this is not going to be Gretna's day.

Easily reached a few miles north of Carlisle, Gretna also boasts a large retail outlet village and two excellent GBG listed pubs are in the vicinity. There is plenty of car-parking close to the ground and a visit here is stress-free. After the last home game of the season, against Clyde on 21 April, the re-development of Raydale Park will continue apace and if they again promotion to the elite Gretna will ground-share at Motherwell, a round-trip of some 150 miles, until the new ground is ready.

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