

**TT No.111: *Justin Holmes*** - Thursday 3rd December 2009; **Fulham v CSKA Sofia**; UEFA Europa League Group Stage; Venue: Craven Cottage, London; Score: 1-0; Admission: £5.00; Programme: £3.00; Attendance: 23,604; Match Rating: 4\*.

I broke my usual rule of trying not to visit the same stadium twice in a season for this Europa League match between Fulham and CSKA Sofia, tempted by a fantastically cheap ticket price of just £5 for booking well in advance of the game. For Fulham at least, there was much riding on this game. After very unluckily only obtaining a point from their home and away games against AS Roma, Fulham needed to beat CSKA Sofia at home and then would probably to win in Switzerland against FC Basle in their final game in order to qualify for the knockout rounds. On paper, the first part of the equation did not appear to be too challenging, given that CSKA Sofia were cast adrift at the bottom of the league with just one point from their first four games.

Craven Cottage is certainly one of my favourite top-flight stadia - full of history and traditional quirks but is still a very modern and comfortable facility. The Johnny Haynes stand is a real throw-back to previous generations with wooden seats, the Cottage in an adjacent corner is certainly a unique feature, and the Riverside Stand, where I was seated for this game, has the excellent feature of, before entering the seating area of the stand, being able to enjoy refreshments right alongside and overlooking the River Thames. The programme was excellent, a very attractive and glossy cover and the contents providing full information regarding Fulham news, the opposition and the Europa League.

As for the game, it was very much a case of a game of two halves. Fulham were superb during the first half and really clicked as a team. They should have taken the lead on 8 minutes, but one of the most reliable penalty takers in the game, Danny Murphy, ballooned the ball over. Fulham only had to wait another 7 minutes before taking the lead thanks to an excellent header from the Hungarian, Zoltan Gera. Unfortunately, Fulham didn't convert their possession and numerous golden opportunities to score into a convincing lead at half time. Inexplicably, in the second half, Fulham were truly awful and Sofia dominated the second half, and as the game reached its conclusion, squandered some wonderful opportunities to equalise, but in the end, Fulham held on for a nerve jangling 1-0 victory.

After AS Roma beat FC Basle in the other game in this group, Fulham now have their destiny in their own hands. Win in Basle in two-week's time and they will qualify, any other result and they will not.