

**TT No. 151: *Mike Latham*** - Sat 6 February 2010: Emirates Scottish Junior Cup Fourth Round: **Renfrew** 1-2 Tayport; Attendance: 250 (est.); Admission: £5; Raffle ticket: £1; Programme: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 4\*.

For the first time in ages a journey north can be contemplated without serious concerns over postponements; the weather is mild and dry and the Renfrew pitch, after a midweek snowstorm has thawed out and drained nicely. Just to be on the safe side there is a hero on hand, the sort that makes visiting Scottish Junior clubs such a joy.

Step forward and take a bow John Brown, Commercial Manager of today's visitors Tayport. As well as overseeing a professionally run club website he also answers his mobile to groundhoppers on Friday evenings. The game looks as though it's on, he tells my travelling companion (an esteemed Premier League cricket club chairman) but just to be on the safe side, he offers to add us to his list of text messages on the morning of the game.

Sure enough, just as we are heading up the M6 contemplating breakfast in Moffat and heralding the return of decent radio with Danny Baker back on the airwaves of 5Live the text comes through. It confirms that this fourth-round tie, originally scheduled for 10 January, will indeed take place.

Renfrew is situated on the banks of the Clyde about six miles west of Glasgow on the road to Paisley. It's an old ship-building town with an ancient and proud history, achieving royal burgh status way back in 1397. There's still a passenger ferry across the Clyde to Yoker though, to the locals' outrage, this could be shut-down later this year. The Renfrew ground is on Inchinnan Road and is named Western Park. It's an old, historic venue, base to the previous junior club in the town, Renfrew Victoria who folded in 1910 and has been Renfrew FC's home since the club was formed in 1912.

Surrounded by the main road on its entrance side and housing on the other three sides, Western Park has suffered more than most from the blight of vandalism that affects so many junior clubs. The wreckage of a once-proud club house now dominates the far corner of the ground and the only cover is provided by a steel structure over a graffiti-clad terrace behind the near-side goal. The dressing rooms are housed in a heavily fortified steel structure behind this end and the rest of the ground is a mixture of crumbling terracing and grassed banking. Refreshments are provided by a corner shop just outside the gate, the tomato soup heartily recommended.

Both these sides have an impressive recent history in the Junior Cup, Tayport having won the competition three times in 1996, 2003 and 2005. But as one supporter confides, they have allowed the team to grow old together and are now re-grouping in the second tier of the East junior league. Renfrew won the cup in 2001, their current no5 Neil Shearer the hero of a penalty shoot-out victory over

Carnoustie with the decisive kick, to atone for runners-up spots in 1917 and 1962. Like their visitors the home side are in the second tier, this time in the West Juniors and as both sides have almost identical league positions a close encounter is predicted.

By kick-off time a decent crowd has assembled and a full-blooded encounter ensues. The visitors have brought a coach-load of supporters and the banter on the terraces is passionate but good-natured. The visitors take the lead after a defensive mix-up after 76 seconds, the home side draw level with a penalty awarded for handball just before half-time. The winner comes midway through the second half with a consummate piece of skill from Tayport skipper Roberto Morris deciding the issue.

The bald facts conceal the fact this was game typical of the competition in my experience. The referee was incredibly tolerant and seemed content to play Yellow Card Bingo without using the red, and relying upon an excellent young linesman for many of the game's crucial moments. The yellow card count, per my basic records, ended as 14, six to the home side and eight to the visitors.

Three fouls in particular were simply horrific and one of the home players escaped with a lecture after randomly kicking an opponent with the ball long out of play. I have long since decided that some Scottish junior referees obviously operate to a different set of rules than those that apply elsewhere. The contrast to the Welsh Premier League game at Connah's Quay Nomads I had witnessed the night before, where the referee quickly asserted control and a well disciplined and fast flowing game ensued, could scarcely have been more marked.

The players, to their credit, get on with it, the trainers from either side were rarely seen on the pitch and the oaths and threats from the side-line evaporated as soon as the final whistle was sounded. These are tough people who don't harbour grudges. It would be very interesting to see just how serious an offence would warrant a red card. After 90 minutes of frenetic action, Tayport had earned their place in the last 16. Neither side had played for two months yet the visitors were just about the better organised side amidst the mayhem.

The Scottish Junior Cup remains a favourite of mine and the experience of a cup-tie, especially in the latter stages of the competition, will linger long in the memory. Forsake your normal expectations about the way games are normally carried out, throw away the rule-book and watch the action unfold, that's my best advice. It's fantastic.