

TT No.153: *Justin Holmes* - Saturday 6th February 2010; **Lisburn Distillery** v Linfield; Northern Irish Premiership; Venue: New Grosvenor Stadium, Ballyskeagh; Score: 0-5; Admission: £9.00; Programme: £2.00; Match Rating: 4*.

So, the high-scoring, one-sided games just keep on coming for me, and long may that continue - at least, certainly in terms of the goals. Today made it 23 goals I have witnessed in my last four games, in which one team has scored at least four goals in each game.

Today's daytrip to Northern Ireland was enabled by a bargain £2 return ticket with Ryanair from Stansted to Belfast City Airport, which is located just three miles east of Belfast city centre, and the current timings of the flights make for a comfortable day out, leaving mid-morning and allowing plenty of time to spare as well as watch a football game in the Belfast area, with seven clubs in the top two divisions within half an hour of the City Airport. For today's game, I chose to take in Lisburn Distillery against Linfield. On arrival at the airport, I embarked on a 5-minute walk to nearby Sydenham train halt (although a courtesy bus is also available), and then a half hour train ride to Lambeg, which is the closest station to Lisburn's home ground, as it situated about 3 miles outside of Lisburn. The New Grosvenor Stadium is a pleasant, brisk half hour walk from Lambeg station along a "B" road through moderately pleasant countryside.

Today's game promised to be a struggle for the home team. Lisburn Distillery have gone from qualifying for this season's Europa League to currently being bottom of the table by some distance, and in recent months, the very existence of the football club has been in real doubt. In recent weeks, the appointment of the former Northern Ireland goalkeeper, Tommy Wright, has apparently brought about a marked improvement in performances, without converting these into many victories. The visitors were Linfield, the biggest club in Northern Ireland and who always take a large following to games (today was no different) but who have been unusually inconsistent this season and found themselves down in fourth place going into this game. Things were looking up for them though, having recently re-signed on loan Peter Thompson, scorer of some 152 goals from 234 games in a previous spell for Linfield before trying his luck in England with Stockport. Linfield has also put Newry City to the sword 5-0 at Windsor Park the previous week. A nice subplot to this game was 40-year old Glenn Ferguson, lining up for Lisburn against the team who released him in the summer after a glittering, medal-laden career with them and leaving them as their third highest goal-scorer of all time. This would be the last time Ferguson plays against Linfield, with his retirement at the end of this season.

As for the stadium, the pitch is surrounded by a greyhound track. This doesn't detract from the view watching the game as the pitch is still close, although it does make it pretty much impossible to watch the game behind one of the goals - the other is not accessible. There is an impressive looking new glass fronted stand

along one side of the pitch, although this is not open for football matches. Alongside this there is a small covered terrace stand, and on the opposite side is a small, traditional seated stand. All in all, a comfortable, neat and tidy stadium.

Lisburn actually started this game quite strongly, although once Linfield took the lead on 22 minutes, there was only going to be one winner. They scored a second on 33 minutes, and the half time lead could and should have been more than 2-0. In the second half, Lisburn battled on gamely, but their limitations were becoming more and more apparent, although they held out until 71 minutes, when the Lisburn goalkeeper, Phil Matthews, hit a clearance straight against the shins of Peter Thompson and the ball sped into the net. That was very unfortunate on the Lisburn goalkeeper, as he had kept the score down with several wonderful saves. Linfield went on to score twice more to ensure a thoroughly convincing 0-5 away win, Peter Thompson scoring twice and no final fairy-tale goalscoring for Glenn Ferguson, who had one strong header saved well by Matthews, but otherwise barely had a sniff.

As I made my way from the stadium to start the long journey home, I reflected on another enjoyable day watching football in the Province. For those who haven't watched football in Northern Ireland, I would wholeheartedly recommend a visit. I have always found games to be very competitive and enjoyable to watch, the people friendly and the support passionate - although this does readily and frequently stray into more colourful language, it has to be said.

06/20