

TT No.174: Justin Holmes - Sat 27th February 2010; **Coleraine** v Bohemians; Setanta Cup Group 2; Venue: The Showgrounds, Coleraine; Score: 1-3; Admission: £8.00; Prog: £2.00; Att: 500 (estimate); Match Rating: 3.

My latest day-trip to Northern Ireland had plenty of twists and turns before I finally ended up in Coleraine. At the time of booking the flights, I had several games to choose from, however since then every game in the Belfast area had been re-arranged, meaning a longer trek than anticipated was required to catch a game. The chances of getting to watch a game looked remote in the days leading up to Saturday, as Northern Ireland was being badly affected by heavy rain and snow. I finally decided on going to the north of Northern Ireland, to watch the interesting looking all-Ireland Setanta Cup competition match at Coleraine against the Dublin based Bohemians. Even this looked like it might not work out, as my flight from London Stansted to Belfast City Airport was delayed due to poor weather conditions meaning that I had a desperate run from the aircraft cabin to nearby Sydenham train halt in less than 5 minutes. Somehow, I made it.

The train journey from Sydenham to Coleraine is a comfortable one, involving a change of trains at Belfast Central and then about an hour train ride through the heart of rural Northern Ireland. With the train arriving in Coleraine just half an hour before kick-off, it was lucky that the ground is located almost adjacent to the train station. Entrance was a reasonable £8, and the programme was attractive looking and in colour, although generally lacking in much detail or interesting information. The Coleraine Showgrounds is a very decent stadium by Northern Irish standards, with one impressive seated grandstand, terracing behind both goals with cover across the width of the penalty area (only one end was open today) and a large bank of terracing along the opposite side to the grandstand. A major downside of the ground is the tall metal fencing which surrounds three of the four sides of the ground. Such fencing not only partially obstructs the view of the action, but it is also certainly a dark reminder of the "bad old days" of football violence. It has been planned to remove this fencing for some time now - the sooner the better.

It was difficult to predict what kind of game this would be. Coleraine went into the game in excellent form, up in fourth place in the Northern Irish Premiership, had won their last three games, including victories at Windsor Park against Linfield, and also away to Cliftonville. Today, they understandably rested most of their first team players considering they are currently in a sequence of playing every midweek. They would also need something approaching a miracle to qualify from the group stages, needing to win by two clear goals today and then hope for a low-scoring draw in the final group game between Bohemians and Glentoran in a couple of weeks-time. There was a place in the team for the exciting Rory Patterson however, scorer of 33 goals already this season, almost twice as many as the next highest scorer in the league, which has earned him a call up to the

Northern Ireland squad - a rare feat indeed for a player plying his trade in the Northern Irish league. Today's visitors were Bohemians, League of Ireland (Republic of Ireland) champions for the last two seasons, and a professional club, whereas Coleraine are only part-timers, and so this match would surely be a tall order for the Northern Irish outfit. What might have levelled the playing field somewhat was that this was Bohemians' first competitive game of 2010 - their league campaign begins next week.

The match started in explosive fashion, with the home side taking the lead in the very first minute through Rory Patterson, who coolly lobbed the keeper. Coleraine indeed looked the better side to start with, against a sluggish Bohemians team, having other good chances to extend their lead, but against the run of play, Bohemians equalised when a ball was nodded in from close range following a corner. Patterson should have put Coleraine back in front just before half time with an almost identical chance from which he earlier scored, but this time the ball dropped agonisingly wide of the goal.

Going into half time, Coleraine could consider themselves unlucky to only be on level terms, however the second half was a completely different story, as Bohemians completely controlled the game. They took the lead a couple of minutes into the second half when a ball was finally struck firmly into the goal following a flurry of blocked shots. The game was sealed eight minutes from time thanks to a fumble from the Coleraine goalkeeper landing at the feet of a Bohemians striker to tuck the ball away from 6 yards.

And so, despite Coleraine's strong first half showing, this match went to form, as League of Ireland clubs generally fare much better than their Northern Irish counterparts in this competition, and Bohemians now look certain to qualify for the knock-out stages barring a heavy defeat in their final group game and a mathematical miracle. As for the Setanta Cup competition, the concept is great, pitching teams from both sides of the Irish border against each other. However, it has been dogged by logistical difficulties, most notably the fact that the two leagues play at different times of the year, and this year, two of the participants, Derry City and Cork City, having to pull out of the competition midway through. Rumours have it that this will be the last time this competition is played, which would be a shame, but hopefully some way can be found to revamp the competition to make it fit in better with the schedules of clubs from both sides of the border.