

TT No.181: *Justin Holmes* - Saturday 6th March 2010; **Crusaders** v Portadown; (Northern) Irish Cup Quarter Final; Venue: Seaview, Belfast; Admission: £9.00; Programme: £2.00; Attendance: 1000 (estimate); Match Rating: 3.

For my second day trip to Northern Ireland within a week, I decided to stay in Belfast on Irish Cup Quarter Final day and head for the north of the city to Seaview, home of Crusaders, and is also one of the very few grounds in the UK to have a synthetic 4G pitch in the UK. The installation of this pitch last November has been predictably controversial, with opponents complaining that a plastic pitch is no substitute for the real thing and carries an increased risk of injury, and so I was curious to have a look at the pitch and a game played on it at first hand.

Getting to Seaview was very straightforward, catching a bus from Belfast City Airport for the quarter of an hour ride into the city centre, and then after spending some time wandering around Belfast City Centre, taking bus number 2 which stops right outside the Seaview stadium after another 15-minute journey.

The first interesting thing to note on arriving at the ground is a small mural on the outside wall of the ground, which was a nice touch - unusual at a football ground, but highly appropriate in a city such as Belfast where murals are to be found in abundance.

On entering the ground, the overall impression was one of a ground that is a pleasingly old-fashioned and traditional, but one that could most certainly do with a lick of paint and general sprucing up. There is a large bank of terracing along two thirds of the length of one side of the pitch, about half of which is covered, although supporting posts can obstruct the view. Shallow banks of terracing are located behind either goal, and the remaining side of the pitch contains a small but steep grandstand, access for which costs an additional £1 to the £9 entrance fee. Seaview certainly couldn't be considered a peaceful setting, located alongside a busy main road one side and a railway line and motorway the other. A view of a large hill behind the main grandstand does make for a pleasant backdrop however. As for the programme, this was quite an impressive effort for a Northern Irish programme, printed in colour with plenty of photographs.

Both teams came into today's game in reasonable form, with Portadown winning four league games in a row to earn their manager, Ronnie McFall, who has been at the Portadown helm for a mightily impressive quarter of a century, the manager of the month award for February, although the traditional curse of this award resulted in Portadown getting a 0-5 hammering at Windsor Park against Linfield in midweek. Crusaders have been more inconsistent recently but won 3-0 at home to Glenavon last Monday in front of the Sky TV cameras, are in 5th place in the league and are very much in contention to qualify for Europe. This game was also almost an exact repeat of last season when the two teams met at the same

Quarter Final stage of the Irish Cup, with Crusaders winning 5-2 at Portadown on their way to lifting the Cup.

On a gloriously sunny afternoon, the game started with Crusaders very much in the ascendancy, creating some excellent chances, although against the run of play, Portadown took the lead on 27 minutes thanks to a well worked move when Jordan Baker attacked wide of the goal, drew the keeper out to close him down and then played the ball back across the goal for Kevin Braniff to fire home past a couple of defenders from 12 yards out. Their lead would only last a couple of minutes though, when Gareth McKeown launched a long throw in into the six-yard box and Jordan Owens flicked the ball past the keeper with a deft header. The game continued in a similar vein for the rest of the half, although Portadown were looking increasingly dangerous and the feeling at half time was that this was a game that could go either way. In the second half, Crusaders took control, with Portadown only having very sporadic ventures towards goal, as Crusaders dominated midfield and wasted some superb chances to win the game, but the score-line remained at 1-1 and the two teams now have to do it all again at Portadown, for what will no doubt be another tight affair between two evenly matched teams, played on grass which should benefit Portadown.

My impressions of the 4G pitch were not that different to what I had imagined beforehand - that it is of very good quality, certainly worlds above the infamous plastic pitches of the 1980's, and the more technically gifted players thrive on it as they can trust and rely on the consistent bounce of the ball. However, it also seems to make players a lot more reluctant to go in for hard tackles, and somehow it just doesn't seem to be proper football. The positive side of having a synthetic pitch has already been clearly demonstrated this season when so many games in the Irish League were postponed during December and January due to snow and ice, causing a horrendous backlog of fixtures. Through it all, Crusaders were able to play their fixtures apart from one time when the game was called off due to fresh snowfall - for a couple of weeks Seaview was the only place in Northern Ireland where football was played, and this is an important consideration for clubs at this level who really feel the effects of having Saturday home games postponed. As with most issues in football, the jury is out as to whether synthetic pitches are a way forward for some non-professional football clubs, but the overriding feeling for me is that senior football should be played on grass.

06/20