

TT No.39: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 26th September 2009; **Inverness CT** v Partick Thistle; Scottish League Division One; Res: 2-3; Att: 3,218; Admission: £18; Programme: £2.50 (40pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

I'd forgotten just how isolated Inverness is. Even starting from the Fife coast, a drive of two and a half hours was required to reach the unappealing Highland capital. Despite the magnificent scenery en route north, Caledonian Thistle's dull stadium, opened in November 1996 at a cost of £5.2m, isn't really worth all that effort. If it hadn't been my last Scottish Football League ground, I'd have been happier at the far more arresting Grant Street Park, watching neighbours Clachnacuddin take on Highland League rivals Wick Academy in the Scottish Cup.

Inverness has always been a dreary transport hub, and recent expansion, consisting largely of industrial estates, hasn't enhanced its limited attractions. At least the Tulloch Caledonian Stadium, at East Longman on the banks of the Moray Firth and overshadowed by the Kessock Bridge, is in the most dramatic part of town. The biggest drawback is the site's exposed location. Even on a gloriously sunny, late summer afternoon, a chill wind whipped mercilessly across the ground. What it must be like watching football here in the depths of winter, I dread to think. An odd spot to choose.

The stadium offers little for the grounds enthusiast to savour. The main stand, on the east side, defies tradition by facing the setting sun - doubtless an irritation for those who have paid most for their seats. It is a two-tier cantilever with a brick base and an upper section clad in blue metal sheeting. The exposed steelwork is painted red. There is an apparent need throughout to satisfy those who, in pre-1994 merger days, followed the Blues of Caledonian and those who supported the Reds of Thistle. The two clubs were bitter rivals. Even now, all these years on, some fans still shout for Caley and others for Thistle. The stand is positioned between the 18-yard lines. Inverness clearly surprised themselves by the speed of their rise through the Scottish League because they have had to add an aesthetically awkward 'wing' of uncovered seats either side of the lower tier. Bet they're popular in January. Two Perspex dugouts flank a central players' tunnel. The lower tier's blue plastic tip-up seats, many of which won't get much shelter from the shallow roof, feature the legend 'ICTFC' picked out in white. There is a glazed hospitality box at the rear, and a good view across the firth towards Beauuly and the peaks surrounding Loch Ness. Behind the stand, the waters of the firth lap up against the edge of the stadium access road. Nautical, but nice.

The north and south stands, some way back from the dead-ball line, are ugly identical twins. Boxy and finished in blue metal cladding, they run the width of the pitch. Nine banks of blue plastic tip-up seats are used to good effect by revealing the word 'Inverness' in white, with the extra space at each end taken up by a single band of red seats. Bet that summary treatment ticks off the Thistle old guard. There is (unsurfaced) parking space to the rear of each. Inverness must do rather

nicely out of charging cars £2 to use them. I do find that annoying. If a club decide to build a stadium out of town, therefore obliging fans to drive to it, they should allow them to park for free. The Kessock Bridge, a suspension construction, bows elegantly behind the north end, carrying the A9 across the firth as it sweeps past the ground on its way to the Black Isle and Dingwall.

The west side, with the aforementioned trunk road close behind, is relatively undeveloped. There is a small area of uncovered seating in the northern half, and a similarly sized open terrace in the southern section. Neither were in use for this game, which was a shame because they offer a means of getting the sun over one's shoulder. A large mast, atop which are those Scottish-style 'drench-lights', stands in both the south-west and north-west corners. Five smaller, conventional floodlight masts march down the west touchline, with a scaffolding television gantry positioned above halfway. There is also a smaller mast in the two corners on the main stand side. None of this, the views apart, will set your pulse racing.

The opening 37 minutes of this game were truly awful. Admittedly, a capricious breeze made life difficult for the players, but a contest between 22 headless chickens did not make for an edifying spectacle. Passes were misplaced, tackles mistimed, shots sliced. It felt, apart from a whipped Bryan Hodge free-kick tipped over by Ryan Esson, like end-of-season stuff. Caley Jags manager Terry Butcher later described the opening as a "total shambles". Then, Partick Thistle scored three times in eight minutes to stun the home crowd. Hodge's corner from the left was headed on by John Robertson, and when Inverness failed to clear, Liam Buchanan (37) cheekily backheeled past Esson from close range. Russell Duncan then made a dreadful hash of dealing with a routine long ball, and Buchanan (39) calmly muscled in to lob the advancing Esson from outside the box. A minute before the break, the Maryhill men, confidence soaring, added a magnificent third from a sweeping counter attack. A flowing move ended with the buoyant Buchanan skipping past two half-hearted challenges and squaring for Alan Archibald to side-foot wide of the exposed Esson. Inverness left the field to a chorus of boos. Butcher, who oversaw relegation from the Premier League last season, tipped back the peak of his cap in disbelief.

That seemed to be that - but the Caley Jags had other ideas. The traffic flow in the direction of the home goal continued early in the second half. Esson made excellent one-on-one saves to deny Simon Donnelly and gangly but effective substitute Chris Erskine. Inverness capitalised on their keeper's heroics by replying with a penalty in the 63rd minute. Jonny Hayes, whose direct running caused Partick numerous problems, was brought down unnecessarily by Robertson after one of several surges in from the left wing, and Adam Rooney sent Jonny Tuffey the wrong way from the spot. The hosts cranked up the pressure with a 76th-minute second. Hayes crossed deep to the back post, and Richie Foran leapt above his marker to guide a header across Tuffey and into the far top corner. Game on! The tedium of earlier was forgotten as Inverness poured forward, winning corner after corner. Partick survived successive scrambles, and a period down to 10 men during lengthy treatment for Hodge. Five minutes of stoppage time must have

seemed interminable for the 300 visiting fans, but their boys clung on precariously for the three points.

Thank goodness we had the heart-warming memories of that nerve-tingling finish to sustain us through the long, long trek back home to York. After almost seven and a half hours at the wheel, I was starting to seize up by the time the floodlit Minster was first spotted. A gruelling end to a great two-week holiday. Now, how about the Highland League?!

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