

**TT No.92: *Emma Jones*** - Tue 10th November 2009; **Cliftonville** v Donegal Celtic; IFA Co-operative Ins'ce Cup Rd 3, 2nd L; Res: 2-1 (3-1 aggregate); Att: 400 (est.); Admission: £9; Programme: £2 (24pp); FGIF Match Rating: \*\*\*.

When I told the bus driver I wanted Solitude, I suspect his quizzical look was less about where I wanted to go, and more about why - a female travelling alone and clearly not from Belfast yet going to a local football match on a chilly Tuesday evening was not his usual passenger at all. I must admit to a slight feeling of trepidation myself, but my work trip to the Northern Irish capital was in sore need of light relief, and my partner was waiting at home in England, avid for news of how my first solo foray into groundhopping had gone. Which is how I found myself riding the 12A out of the city centre, looking for floodlights. The only other people alighting at my stop were two young lads with red and white scarves - much more within the bus driver's comfort zone. Still, he obligingly tipped me the wink when we neared the ground.

Cliftonville's claim to fame is that they're the oldest football club in Ireland, having formed 130 years ago in September 1879. You may wonder who they played until the second team in Ireland formed; the founder, a Belfast businessman called John McAlery, clearly pondered the same thing, because he quickly encouraged the Knock Cricket and Lacrosse Club to start a team. In the meantime, Cliftonville FC played a team of rugby players (their first game) and two teams McAlery had persuaded to visit from Scotland for exhibition matches. The Reds have been at the same ground ever since, making it the oldest football ground in Ireland. In its time, it's played host to cup finals and internationals, and was the national home ground in the 1890s and 1900s.

Solitude, although poetic, is hardly an accurate name for the ground. From its earliest days, when it was surrounded by nothing more than thin hedges, over which McAlery would have to stop gate-crashers jumping, it's become hemmed in. It's now surrounded by rows of terraced housing, a bowling green and a waterworks, the latter two giving the goal end stands their names. The Waterworks Stand, to the south-east, opened only recently, and has yet to be completely finished; the smell of fresh paint and turps mixes headily with the fried onions wafting from the nearby burger stall. The Bowling Green End is where to find away supporters; that night I found, on a quick head count, about 80. Not that many, given that this was a local derby, but they did their best to sound like many more.

The Main Stand, to the south-west, is the oldest at Solitude, and has two tiers - the lower terraces, and the upper seats and benches. Behind them both is the social club, quiet before the game, and a little dated in its decor, but spacious, clean and warm. The entrance brings you into the ground between the Main Stand and the Whitehouse, a rather oddly-shaped building, which houses the changing rooms, boardroom, and club shop, where some rather attractive badges, amongst

other items, are on sale. The commercial manager, Bronagh McMullan whose patch this is, is welcoming and informative. Don't make the same error as I did, and assume Bronagh is a man; news of your mistake will spread, and you won't live it down, although she'll be charming about it.

Solitude has always had problems with drainage, and tonight was no exception; the players emerged to a quagmire at the end of the tunnel, which they overcame with small, and surprisingly balletic, leaps onto terra firmer. Cliftonville went into this tie 1-0 up from the first leg, but failed to show the confidence that should have engendered until the second half, although their game plan may have been slightly rocked by going one down a mere nine minutes into the game. Donegal captain Stephen McAlorum slid a neat ball past Reds goalkeeper John Connolly to bring Donegal level on aggregate. Suddenly, it was all to play for. Cliftonville did not hang about, levelling the score with a beautifully curving free-kick into the bottom corner by Kieran O'Connor five minutes later, and waking the home crowd up for the first time in the match. Ten minutes later, a neat corner by Celtic was deflected just as it curved low in towards the goal, but the rest of the first half brought no more real action.

In the second half, O'Connor nearly bagged his second with a shot that bounced hard off the crossbar in the 56th minute, but it was Ryan Catney who made the game safe six minutes later, slamming home a zinger of a shot from a half-heartedly cleared corner by Mark Patterson. A couple of chances to widen the gap failed to find their mark, and the game closed with a comfortable 3-1 aggregate win for the Reds, who will meet either Lisburn Distillery or Coleraine in the quarter-finals. A fun change of pace for me, in a work-heavy week away from home, and an entertaining spectacle for all, and I am no longer a travelling-solo virgin. What more could you ask from a chilly Tuesday evening in Belfast?

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