

TT No.99: Keith Aslan - Sat 21st November 2009 (kick off 14.06); **Stonewall v Bethnal Green 'A'**; Middlesex County League Premier Division; Result 0-4; Admission: free; Prog: free; Attendance 4 (2 home 0 away 2 neutral).

This was about as close to my Penthouse Suite in uptown Hammersmith as it gets, groundhopping wise. The nearest station to Stonewall is in fact Barnes, but unless a rail replacement bus is your transport of choice, better to go for Hammersmith which is a very pleasant 45 minutes stroll away along the Thames. For the less energetic, there is the option of 4 buses from the Lower Bus Station. Hammersmith has two of them. Impressed huh?

Stonewall play inside the Athletics track on the side of Barn Elms furthest from the main road. It is fully fenced off and has a glorious little stand as its centrepiece from which is obtained an excellent view of the game. With only a gentle zephyr blowing in from the Thames, the corrugated plastic roof made a loud racket flapping throughout the game and could be a bit dodgy in windy weather, but was most welcome when the predicted rain arrived. Behind the stand is a lake belonging to the "Barnes & Mortlake Angling and Preservation Society" although quite how spending all day sitting by a lake seeing how many fish you can murder squares with preservation I can't imagine.

The pitch was unaffected by the heavy rain of late, but the surface was very uneven and an acquaintance with Mr. Roller would not go amiss. More worryingly, there were two holes in one of the goalmouths that on another day with another referee, could be deemed dangerous.

The changing rooms are a long way from the pitch and it is from here that the helpful secretary supplied me with an all colour eight-page programme that is a credit to the editor the team and the league. A word of praise here for the much-maligned Middlesex League. When about eight or nine years ago they decided to make programme issuing compulsory in the top division the general reaction was "like that's ever going to happen" Well, I've been to every club that's passed thorough since, and there's been a lot of them, and I've attained 100% satisfaction paper-wise. No broken photocopiers, no holidaying editors, just the requisite programme every time. Well done to all concerned.

Bethnal Green 'A', or "the Greens" as they are inventively nicknamed, were late arriving due to "heavy traffic in the Hammersmith area" Gosh who would have thought it, Saturday lunchtime and Chelsea at home you couldn't have foreseen that one. In fairness to them they didn't hang about. There was no sign of them at half one when I left to enjoy a Moccha and cheese toastie in a nearby brasserie, but by two o'clock they were out on the pitch and virtually ready to go. This is in marked contrast to another tardy arrival I encountered earlier on this season where the team showed no urgency and after a lengthy warm up, at five past

three, they decided to go back to the changing rooms for a team talk. I won't name and shame them, let's just say they begin with 'M' and end with 'orpeth'

In fairness this wasn't the greatest match I've ever seen. The rutted-pitch made good football impossible which suited both sides. Stonewall are the current holders of the Gay World Cup, while not as prestigious as its heterosexual counterpart, I can't imagine many Step 7 leagues have world beaters among their clubs. World beaters they may be, but Bethnal Green Reserves are an altogether sterner test and it was not difficult to see why Stonewall have only won one game this season. However, the 0-4 score-line greatly flattered the Eastenders. No.2 only crossed the goal-line in the imagination of the linesman and goals 3 and 4 came in the 93rd and 95th minute of a game that's only supposed to last 90.

Stonewall have a very refreshing attitude to their football with the emphasis on enjoyment rather than winning, which is just as well. The social side seems to be the important thing and you get the impression that if they ever sacked their manager it would be for not buying his round after the match rather than any results-based criteria. I know many 'hoppers are leaving Stonewall as they are expecting it to appear on a hop. A conversation with an official suggests that this is very, very unlikely and I would recommend a visit before the holes in the goal mouths get any bigger.

06/20