

**TT No. 130: *Justin Holmes*** - Saturday 27th November 2010; **AS Monaco** v OGC Nice; French Ligue 1; Venue: Stade Louis II, Monaco; Score: 1-1; Admission: €26.00; Programme: N/A; Attendance: 9134; Match Rating: 3.

A winter long weekend trip to the Côte d'Azur prompted a visit to the only team in the French football league system to be based outside of France - AS Monaco. Whilst Monaco has never been the best supported of clubs, even less so in recent times as they have struggled in the lower half of Ligue 1, this match did have an added attraction of being a local derby against OGC Nice, the two clubs separated by just eight miles.

Being based in Nice for the weekend, Monaco-Monte Carlo was a 25-minute train ride, with the Stade Louis II about a ten-minute walk downhill into the Fontvieille district in the western fringe of Monaco. In such a densely populated, tiny country, it's rather surprising that there is enough room for a stadium at all, and indeed, the ground is tightly packed in amongst residential housing, with an underground car park underneath the stadium. Tickets are available from the ticket office inside the stadium - I purchased mine earlier in the day, although tickets were still available to purchase in the run up to the match. The cheapest seats, at €10.00, were behind the goal, but for "high risk" games such as against Nice or Marseille, these were only available for purchase by residents of Monaco. With the scourge of football watchers, an athletics track, between the spectators and the pitch, it was a good job I was not able to be tempted into purchasing the cheapest tickets behind the goal, so far away from the action were the seats. My seat, for €25.00 (plus an extra euro surcharge for purchasing on the day of the game), was in one of the corners, which offered a good view of the action directly in line with one of the goal lines. Behind the other goal is where the away fans were housed - with a third of the crowd being away supporters, this was by far the most densely populated part of the ground. The away end is the only uncovered part of the ground, with attractive large narrow arches behind the seating area. The other three covered stands certainly have unique and attractive designs, also incorporating small arches in the middle of the stands. Apart from behind the goals, views are good if a little distant with no obstructions. As is common in France, no programmes or the like were on offer.

In truth, the omens were not good for this being an entertaining game. Both teams are struggling in Ligue 1 - Monaco have only won once in the league since late August and were down in 17th place in the 20-team league. As for Nice, they were just one place better off and incredibly had not scored a single away goal since late August, spanning six games. Being a local derby still gave hope for a competitive and intriguing match. The fans were certainly "up for it", being vocal in the streets before the game and the Nice fans in particular building up a terrific atmosphere inside the stadium before the game, then letting off flares as the teams came out onto the pitch. The stadium was still only half full with just over

9,000 fans in attendance, although this figure was still a third more than have attended most Monaco games this season.

The match started off quite evenly, with both sides carving out half chances. However, a match defining moment came on 26 minutes when Nice were reduced to ten men for a very harsh sending off, when Drissa Diakate clumsily tried to nick the ball in mid-air without any kind of reckless lunge and seeming to make little contact with the Monaco player. Nice understandably became much more cautious in their approach after the sending off, and with Monaco playing well in midfield until they reached the final third, a goalless score-line at half time was little surprise. The theme continued into the second half, until Monaco were awarded a rather generous penalty when Dieumerici Mbokana felt a slight tap on his shin and over he went. Substitute, Park Chu Young struck the penalty firmly down the middle to give the home side the lead. Absolute respect must be given to the South Korean, who gave much needed inspiration to his team having played two games in the previous four days, on Tuesday and Thursday - in China in the Asian Games, and only arrived in Monaco the day before this game. Nice never looked out of the game and deservedly got back on level terms five minutes from time when Emerse Fae launched a rapid counter attack from deep inside and his own half and played a wonderful slide-rule pass through the defence for substitute Eric Mouloungui to shoot the ball low past the keeper. This unfortunately led to some crowd violence with the many Nice fans who were in the home areas, although happily not to the extent which occurred at this fixture last season which caused Nice to play a game behind closed doors. The game ended as a draw, which in the context of the match must be considered a wonderful result for Nice, whereas Monaco must be disappointed to only take a point in the game having played with an extra man for over an hour and led with just five minutes remaining.

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