

TT No.172: Ian Hill - Sun 30th January 2011; **1.FC Union Berlin v SC Paderborn 07**; German 2. Bundesliga; Result: 0-2; Att: 11,877; Admission: 10 euro's; Programme: 1.5 euro: Rating: 3*.

The game at Union Berlin was a revisit for me as I was interested to see the ground improvements that had taken place a few years ago. The journey to Berlin was a bit worrying as my attempts to see a game the previous day had been unsuccessful due to frozen pitches at Bangor City and Rhyl. This led to a wonderful day out in the North Wales seaside resort until I could escape on my pre booked train.

Have we gone a bit soft in this country regarding when a pitch is and isn't playable? The pitch at Bangor looked fine but I didn't get to walk on it but surely there must be more of an effort to get games played. It causes numerous problems for clubs, as in Bangor's case - what were they going to do with all the pies? On the other hand, it would be nice if they had put a sign-up telling people the game was off so alternative arrangements could be made.

Bangor's Farrar Road ground is a bit worse for wear but has tremendous character. The state of the main stand is a bit worrying though, as it is propped up by three large wooden frames at the back. The club will probably move in the next couple of years and this ground will be a sad loss.

Rhyl broke the news in the local press that they would not be applying for a League of Wales license next season. This is due to outstanding debts that have not been cleared and they were worried that this news may lead to some of their better players leaving. A strong League of Wales needs a Rhyl in it. They are one of the bigger clubs with a good ground and decent support. Rules are rules though but I'm sure they will be missed by the other clubs especially the ones along the North Wales coast.

Back to the weather! Everything was white as the plane landed in Berlin along with a smattering of freezing fog. I thought the game would be another casualty but the Germans are very resilient and it was on. There were no worries about spectator safety outside the ground - a bit of grit was thrown down - it was a bit treacherous in places as I auditioned for the German version of "Dancing on Ice" much to the hilarity of the people around me. Union Berlin

Here you get a two-for-one deal, as there is not one, but two clubs named Union in Berlin!

Founded 1966 in its current format, but the roots are much deeper. In 1906, SC Olympia 06 Oberschönweide was created, and it took 14 years to give up the Olympics and they became SC Union. In 1923, they were defeated by Hamburger SV in the finals of the German championship. In the interwar period, Union was one of Berlin's premier clubs, winning the local championship and playing at the larger German stage.

In the post WWII period, Union was split. The players and coaches fled to the West, and created "Union Berlin", whereas the eastern part of the club remained SG Oberschönweide. The Union team was a powerhouse in Berlin, and big matches drew huge crowds. In 1953, a playoff against Hamburg drew 85,000 into the Olympiastadion, and a decisive game against Tennis Borussia drew 75,000. However, with the construction of the Berlin wall in 1961, things began to go downhill rapidly. Today Union 06 plays in the lower divisions before crowds consisting of players girlfriends, wives and kids.

The eastern branch of the club finally gave up the district name, and became 1.FC Union Berlin in 1966. Now there were two "Unions" in non-unified Berlin, but with the collapse of the western side, FCU became the dominant force. FCU remained the most popular East Berlin club for several years. The sole "honour" would be the winning of the GDR-Cup back in 1968. Gradually, they began to lose ground to the "cheaters" at Dynamo Berlin, the Stasi club.

After the reunification, Union continued to have decent results on the field, but the financial situation brought the club on the verge of oblivion. Only a last-minute fan protest saved the club. Although things were a bit tight, they survived and were eventually able to bring in sponsors.

Travel to Union Berlin

I took a day return Easy-jet flight from London Luton (ha ha) to Berlin Schonefeld. This was followed by the S Bahn from the Airport, changing at Ostkreuz, to Kopenick (pronounced Coopernick) Station. In the station hall turn right and then left and walk for about 5 minutes and then turn left under the railway bridge. Turn right and walk through a wood to get to the An der Alten Forsterei. Programmes are on sale outside the station. Alternatively, you can turn left out the station hall then right which takes you to a club bar which was packed. Programmes are on sale here as is beer and universal sausages. You will find people selling cheap beer on the street along with bottle collectors who return the empties to get a refund at local shops.

It is one of the few stadiums where one of the main access routes is via a wood so in a way it's quite unique.

Admission

Tickets can be purchased at the entrance gates. I was looking for a ticket office but was directed to one of the little windows to purchase my ticket. I chose to stand behind the goal for a bargain 10 Euro's.

Food

There are various food and drink outlets inside the ground. You can choose from beer, mulled wine, sausages, coffee, cakes etc.

Souvenirs

Various souvenirs are available outside the ground which I presume are unofficial. The interesting thing about this club is that they are very clued up as are their supporters club. It was a freezing day in Berlin so the supporters had some special one-off woollen hats on sale for 5 euro's which they wanted people to wear at the forthcoming derby against Hertha. When people are buying 10 hats at a time you know they are a success. It appears despite the club's precarious financial position people are not ripped off. The hats were good quality and also reversible.

Souvenir vans are located around the stadium with a good selection of items on sale. The supporters have a table stall selling various items and were selling loads of club stickers which will no doubt appear on various posts etc around Berlin.

Pre-Match

The club's stadium announcer appears on the large screen before the game and is a double of Benny from Abba.

The Ground

In the late 1990s the first plans for the future of Union's home began to be drawn up. After several years of planning and discussion on various proposals, the redevelopment of the Alte Försterei finally began at the end of the 2007/08 season. Along with the main work of replacing the crumbling stone and cinder terracing with concrete terracing and installing a roof over the previously open terraces, many other minor improvements were completed, such as the installation of new perimeter fencing, new seats in the main stand and undersoil heating and a digital scoreboard (although the famous old manual scoreboard in the corner between the Gegengerade terrace and the Zuckertor(waldseite) end of the ground has been retained). Most of the work during the redevelopment was carried out by over 2,300 supporters volunteering their services. Specialist firms were only called in for more complex tasks such as installing the cantilever roof.

After playing their home matches at the Jahn-Sportpark in Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg district during the 2008/09 season, the stadium was re-opened on 8 July 2009 in time for a friendly against fellow Berlin side Hertha BSC. Since the redevelopment, the stadium has also been used for a small number of non-football events, among them rock concerts, and bike shows.

When in 1966 Union entered the DDR-Oberliga, East Germany's highest league, the stadium soon needed to be expanded. The ground was first extended in 1970, followed by further extensions to the terracing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which increased the capacity to 22,500. The facilities at Alte Försterei had long begun to show their age though and as the club was not able to properly maintain the expansive ground. Later, after German reunification, when Union were assigned by the German Football Association to play in the 3rd league, the outdated stadium proved only one of a number of factors that hampered the club's push for promotion to higher leagues.

Prior to the redevelopment, the terracing at the ground was in such a poor state of repair that its continued use was only on condition of the capacity being drastically

cut to 18,100 spectators. In the late 1990s, Union were only allowed to continue playing at the Alte Försterei on the basis of special temporary licenses until the DFL (German Football League) stopped continuing to renew these in 2006, meaning the stadium would soon no longer eligible to stage any matches in the top three tiers of German football. The club were therefore forced to make a decide whether they would redevelop the Alte Försterei ground or make a permanent move to a different ground, something that which was unlikely to have been approved by large sections of the fan base who consider the ground to be the club's spiritual home.

The Match

Not the best game and a very disappointing one for Union as they went down 2-0 in a game they should have got something out of.

Programme

Exactly the same as the one I picked up a couple of years ago. Even the cover design is the same. For 1.5 Euro's you get a 56-page A5 full colour glossy issue which is very good. As stated before, the programme is on sale at the S Bahn station and also inside the ground at the official souvenir stands. A free supporter's club fanzine is handed out as you enter the terraces.

Final Whistle

The Union supporters do like their beer and on the final whistle there was a stampede to the woods as the male supporters looked for the first available tree.

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