

TT No. 194: Ian Hill - Fri 11th February 2011; **Rot Weiss Erfurt** v SpVgg Unterhaching; German 3 Liga; Result: 4 0; Att: 5,704; Admission: 19 Euros; Programme: 1 euro: Rating: 3*.

A three-match tour of former East German League sides was planned for the weekend, with fixtures conveniently falling on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. After flying into Berlin Schonefeld Airport, I travelled to Leipzig on a very impressive ISE (Inter City) train. Leipzig Hauptbahnhof (railway station) has changed a great deal since my last visit to the city to watch a World Cup game between Serbia and Holland. It is now a very impressive building with a two-storey shopping complex underneath.

Getting There

I travelled by train to Erfurt which took 1 hour and 10 minutes. I did start to worry a bit on the way there as there were numerous fields flooded on the way with one small football stadium completely under water. With time to spare I had a walk through the centre of Erfurt. It looked like quite a bit of regeneration work had taken place.

To reach the Steigerwaldstadion I caught a number 1 tram from the town centre. Tickets can be purchased from ticket machines at the tram stops. Unfortunately, the machines, unlike the ones in Leipzig, do not offer a translation facility in English. The tram stops right outside the stadium which is about a 10-minute journey.

The Stadium

The Steigerwaldstadion is a small version of the Don Valley Stadium in Sheffield but not as good. Basically, it was rubbish. The ground is dominated by a running track with a covered seated stand with a canvas roof along one side of the pitch. The rest of the ground has uncovered terracing on two sides with low level standing behind one goal. I think some uncovered seating is opposite the main stand. There are spectacular leaning floodlight towers, this is as good as it gets, with a traditional large scoreboard behind one goal.

Behind the main stand are some metal upside cones which are the entrance to the underground VIP areas. Built into the back of the stand is the club shop. A lot of the stock is cheap and cheerful quality but expensive in price. The customer care service by one member of staff was sadly lacking. I think the description could be - miserable and rude!

The ground was built in 1931 and holds 19,439 spectators. From 1948-1991 it was known as the Georgij Dimitroff Stadion in honour of the Bulgarian Communist leader.

Admission

I paid 19 Euros to sit in the main stand as there was heavy rain before the game and this is the only part of the ground that is covered. Tickets can be bought outside the ground from ticket windows. Programmes are also sold here although I would advise buying them inside the ground. The ticket office windows have very small hatches so the woman trying to pass them through looked like she was taking part in an origami competition - great!

Supporters Bar

There is a very dingy supporter's bar next to the ticket offices. I walked in without any problem to have a beer before the game.

Rot Weiss Erfurt

The club has roots that go back to a cricket club founded in 1895. As they broadened their interests, they came to be called Sport Club Erfurt. The club was a founding member of the German Football Association in 1900 and in 1904 they joined the Verband Mitteldeutscher Ballspielvereine (Central German Football League). The side won the league championship in 1908-09 and advanced as far as the semi-final of the national round where they lost to the eventual champion. While Erfurt did manage to play for a number of seasons in the premier level Gauliga Mitte, formed after 1933, they failed to earn any honours.

In the aftermath of World-War II the Allies banned all organizations, including sport and football clubs. In 1946, the Soviet occupation authorities permitted the organization of five district sports clubs in Erfurt. SG Erfurt West encompassed the area of the city once served by SC Erfurt 1895 and VfB Erfurt and drew footballers who had played for these clubs. Success came quickly with an appearance in the 1948 Thüringer final, followed by a title in 1949. A quick series of name changes went hand-in-hand with a series of failed cup and final appearances: as Fortuna Erfurt in 1949, KWU Erfurt in 1950, and BSG Turbine Erfurt in 1951. In 1954 and 1955, Turbine captured consecutive East German national titles, but then slipped back into the pack and out of tier I for the first time in 1959. The team was up and down between the first and second divisions through the 60s, being relegated three times, but always winning immediate promotion. Like other East German clubs at the time they suffered as the best players were routinely plucked to play for favoured clubs with politically powerful sponsors.

East German football underwent major changes in 1965 with the creation of "pure" football clubs in the place of broadly generalised sports clubs. The number one football sides of SC Turbine Erfurt and BSG Optima Erfurt were merged in 1966 and revived the name FC Rot-Weiß Erfurt, while the more junior sides stayed with their original clubs. Rot-Weiß was unusual for its time in that the club did not have a name that honoured some socialist virtue. In 1980, Rot-Weiß appeared in the East German Cup final, losing to Carl Zeiss Jena (3-1).

German re-unification and the merger of the leagues of East and West Germany in the early 90's brought exciting times to Rot-Weiß. A third-place finish in the NOFV-Oberliga Nordost in 1990-91 earned them a spot in the 2. Bundesliga for the next

season, as well as a turn in the UEFA Cup 1991-92 where they went out against eventual winner AFC Ajax Amsterdam in the second round. That effort made them the last side to appear internationally for East Germany.

Through the 90s and into the new millennium, Rot-Weiß remained a tier III side. They had a close call in 2001 when they avoided relegation only because SSV Ulm 1846 was denied a license because of its financial difficulties. During this time the club went to the league final seven times and came away as Thuringian champion each time. Unfortunately, they were never able to make it past this point and were always subsequently put out in the first round of the German Cup. In 2004, the club made its way back into 2. Bundesliga but finished dead last and so currently plays in Regionalliga Nord (III). In 2008, Erfurt finished in 7th place in Regionalliga Nord and so qualified for the new 3rd Liga.

The Programme

As always in Germany the programme was good value for money at 1 euro. It was a bit disappointing that the 40-page full colour glossy issue is A4 in size printed on floppy paper.

The Game

A very comfortable win for Rot Weiss although Unterhaching were unlucky not to score.

After the game the tram journey back to the railway station was a bit of a nightmare as the younger Erfurt supporters thought they were auditioning for "Green Street - The German Way". This led to a lot of over exuberance which spilled out around the railway station. This led to three of them being beaten up by a very disgruntled local resident.

To be quite honest the whole visit was a bit of a disappointment and hopefully the campaign to get a new stadium for Rot Weiss Erfurt will not include a dreaded running track. It's hard to take a club seriously that have a very naff club song and run out to an instrumental version of pop legend's Boney M hit "Daddy Cool".

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