

TT No.223: *Justin Holmes* - Sat 2nd April 2011; **Fredrikstad** v Viking Stavanger; Norwegian Premier League; Venue: Fredrikstad Stadion, Fredrikstad; Score: 0-1; Admn: 175 NOK; Programme: N/A; Att: 9005; Match Rating: 3.

For today's fare, I decided to seek my first taste of Norwegian football, aided by Ryanair's cheap £12 return ticket price and with flight timings making a daytrip possible. Having arrived in Rygge airport mid-morning, I took a quick bus transfer to the Rygge train station and then a 17-minute train ride to Fredrikstad, located south-east of Oslo and about 30km from the border with Sweden.

Having a few hours to spare in advance of kick-off, I was able to spend time exploring the town of Fredrikstad - unfortunately, certainly by Norwegian standards, this fairly industrial, rundown (by Scandinavian standards) town with no real heart to it is rather forgettable, although maybe my impression was influenced by the dank, increasingly foggy day. However, what was impressive was how football fever certainly seemed to have taken hold of the people of Fredrikstad, with displays of support of the town's club abound, many flags flying along the riverside and across the main bridge connecting the town centre to the stadium, and with advertising and promotions visible throughout the town. The atmosphere of the game built up in the hours before kick-off, with hordes of fans of both clubs congregating outside bars and cafes in the town centre, all very good natured and without the intimidating bordering on hostile atmosphere at many pre-match gatherings associated with English league football. It's possible that the town's support of the club was heightened today as this was Fredrikstad's first game back in the top flight having been promoted.

The unimaginatively named home ground of Fredrikstad, the Fredrikstad Stadion, is located less than a five-minute walk from the town centre, over a bridge and built on old shipyards - indeed, two of the old mechanical workshops have been converted into modern looking all-seater stands along either length of the pitch. Behind both goals are identical looking stands, both consisting two thirds seating and one third standing. The ground has an attractive, symmetrical feel to it, with a fair amount of character considering it was only opened in 2007, and another plus point is all of the stands being close up to the pitch. I purchased my ticket for a seat behind one of the goals online for the equivalent of around £19.00, so that I could proceed straight to the entrance to have my printed-off e-ticket scanned. No programmes were issued here. My positive impression of Fredrikstad's support was enhanced by a sing-along right before kick-off to the club's anthem, with the words displayed Karaoke style on the big screens. Such support continued throughout the game, and I have to say I have always been impressed with the passionate but always good-natured support of football in the Scandinavian countries.

Fredrikstad were promoted back into the Tippeligaen after one season in the second tier by winning the promotion play-offs last season, having finished third in the league, and they made a solid start in their opening league game, winning 2-1

at Aalesund. Viking Stavanger are historically one of the most successful teams in Norwegian football, although in recent seasons have had to make do with mid-table obscurity, and finished in ninth place in the 16-team league. Viking lost 0-2 at home to Valarenga in their opening game. For an English spectator, Viking had the most familiar player on the pitch, their captain Erik Nevland, who played for Fulham up to last season.

On a foggy and cold afternoon, this was not the most entertaining of games in truth, with plenty of errors committed by both sides although there were still plenty of clear chances. Fredrikstad always looked the superior side, never really imposing themselves on the game but missing some glorious chances to open the scoring, whilst Viking were a rather ugly team to watch - guilty of frequent cynical fouls, pushing, and as the game wore on, time-wasting. Just as it was looking inevitable that if there were to be a goal, Fredrikstad would score it, this was one of those occasions when the ugly brand of football prevailed when Viking scored the winner on 79 minutes, although it was a wonderful goal worthy of winning any game. A Fredrikstad defender hooked the ball high over his shoulder from close to the corner flag, the ball was glanced on by a Viking player and Tomasz Sokolowski rifled in a fierce low shot on the half volley through a crowd of players from 20 yards out which gave the keeper no chance. A superb goal that Viking did not really deserve, and although the home side tried to bombard Viking's goal in the closing minutes, the three points went back to Stavanger.

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