

**TT No.277: Justin Holmes** - Weds 4th May 2011; Toronto FC v FC Edmonton; Canadian Championship S-F 2nd Leg; Venue: The BMO Field, Toronto; Res: 1-0 (4-0 aggregate); Admission: 27.00 C\$; Prog: 5.00 C\$; Att: 17,937; Match Rating: 2.

Having booked a trip to Toronto last year before the Major League Soccer fixtures for the season had been announced, it was something of a gamble that I would be able to watch Toronto FC game whilst in the city, a gamble that appeared to have backfired when the fixtures were announced and Toronto FC would not be playing at home during my stay. However, to my great relief, the second leg of the Canadian Championship semi-final was scheduled during my stay, and so I was assured of watching what I know best, a football match, in between watching games I knew little about, lacrosse and baseball.

The home of Toronto FC, the BMO Field, which was only opened in 2007, when the new Toronto FC franchise played their first match, is located about two miles west from Toronto city centre. Trams and buses are available, however, I chose to make the pleasant walk along the shore of Lake Ontario to the ground, which took about three quarters of an hour. The setting is not attractive, located in an urban entertainment complex and with a busy expressway passing close by. The ground is completely open, with no cover available on any side, which certainly made conditions this evening feel cold, with no protection from a stiff wind off Lake Ontario. Behind one of the goals and along one of the lengths is single tier seating constructed to an identical height and inclination, a theme which is continued along the other length, although this side has an additional tier, with a fairly small number of boxes along the top, with a small roof above. Behind the other goal is a fairly narrow stand but with steeper inclination of seating - this was constructed in 2010, after the original capacity of the stadium proved insufficient. The BMO Field is neat and attractive on the eye, and benefits from being "soccer specific" unlike some MLS venues, ensuring the fans are close to the action and has a compact feel, although the open nature of the ground would make generating a good atmosphere difficult. The 66-page programme was similar in format to English league programmes and was a very interesting read printed on glossy hardened paper. However, and quite surprisingly, programmes did not seem to be that popular, with few people appearing to purchase one, and apparently only 1,000 are printed per game.

The Canadian Championship is only contested by the four top teams in Canada, all of whom play in either the Major League Soccer or the North American Soccer League, and the winner qualifies for Canada's one entry into the CONCACAF Champions League. Toronto FC have won the Canadian Championship for the last two seasons, whilst tonight's visitors, FC Edmonton, are new entrants in the competition, having only been formed last year and this being their debut season, playing in the North American Soccer League, one level below the MLS but with a large gulf in class between the two leagues with no promotion or relegation.

Having previously been contested as a three-team mini league, this season's competition is being played as knock-out, two leg affairs. Tonight's game was the semi-final second leg, and the tie looked as good as over already, with Toronto winning 3-0 in Edmonton last week, although by all accounts, FC Edmonton had given a good account of themselves before have a player sent off after just half an hour. Neither team came into this match in much form in the league, with Toronto FC having only won one game all season, not won in six games and been defeated by Seattle Sounders 3-0 at the weekend. FC Edmonton had made an excellent start to their inaugural season, winning their first two league games but then losing their next two, including a 0-5 home defeat to Montreal Impact at the weekend. Only two names involved this evening were familiar to me, both within the Toronto set-up - Richard Eckersley, the former Manchester United youngster currently on loan from Burnley, and Aron Winter, the former Dutch international, is currently head coach.

With the score-line from the first leg, I feared for a lacklustre match, and unfortunately this is exactly how the game panned out. In the opening minutes, Toronto played keep ball, and their intention to coast into the final of the competition whilst expending as little energy as possible was clear. However, midway through the first half, they did make repeated attacks towards Edmonton's goal with little resistance, and on 21 minutes, the home side extended their overall advantage to four unanswered goals, when the excellent young Ecuadorian, Joao Plata, whose silky skills were a rare highlight throughout the match, jinked around several defenders before dinking a ball over to a completely unmarked Alan Gordon 10 yards out from goal, who had time to control the ball before firing past the Edmonton goalkeeper. Shortly after the goal came a rather interesting moment, as the crowd chanted for Danny Dichio on 24 minutes - a ritual that the Toronto fans perform during every match to mark the when Dichio scored Toronto's first ever goal in the 27th minute of a match. The rest of the half, and indeed the rest of the game, was a dull affair, with Toronto playing for the most part at a pedestrian pace, but losing possession regularly with stray or predictable passes, whilst Edmonton were extremely limited, electing to shoot when within 25 yards of the goal, never testing the goalkeeper. And so, predictably, it was Toronto who comfortably progressed to the final, where they will meet the Vancouver Whitecaps, who triumphed after extra-time against Montreal Impact, although Toronto's fans enthusiastic cheering of their team at half-time and full-time was interesting considering the poor quality of football from their team as they laboured to a narrow victory on the night against a poor team, but maybe this is what supporting your team should be about, in contrast to the ridiculous readiness of English football fans to turn on their own team.

07/20