

TT No.288: Justin Holmes - Sat 4th June 2011; **Calais RUFC v SC Douai**; Championnat de France Amateur 2, Grp B; Venue: Stade de l'Epopée, Calais; Score: 4-0; Admn: €4.00; Prog: None; Att: 1000; (estimate); Match Rating: 3.

For what would be my final game of the 2011-12 football season, I decided to head over the English Channel today to see if Calais Racing Union Football Club, who looked a rather ramshackle outfit when I last watched them back in pre-season last July just a few days after the club had been liquidated could now achieve promotion.

A delay to my lunchtime ferry from Dover to Calais meant that I had little time to spend in Calais town centre, from which the Stade de l'Epopée is about a 40-minute walk eastwards. Walking directly back to the ferry terminal took about 50 minutes. It is located a short distance away from Calais' previous home ground, the Stade Julien Denis, and right next to the main motorway from the ferry port and with just a university campus, housing and tower blocks for company. Not a particularly pleasant location, but a fairly common type for a new build stadium which opened in 2008. It does have quite an interesting design though, with a slight curve to the roof as one approaches, some open space between the top of the grandstands and the roof, and the outside of the stands, coloured in burgundy, brown and white. Tickets are bought from a ticket office building outside the gates, and the inside of the all-seater ground is neat, roomy and well laid out with no obstructions of view and continuous seating around and close to the pitch. Today, it was possible to sit wherever one wanted, despite a specific seat allocation printed on the ticket. It is an impressive stadium that would not look out of place in the top two divisions, indeed, that was exactly why the stadium was built, when Calais RUFC had aspirations for promotion to Ligue 2 at least and when they had to play their major cup games at Boulogne or Lens. Unfortunately for Calais, soon after the stadium opened, they were relegated from the "National", the third tier of French football, and were relegated a level below to where they should have been due to financial irregularities. They won their division of the CFA 2 last season, but were denied promotion when the club was liquidated - many though thought they were lucky to be able to maintain their status, instead of being relegated. So, still in the fifth, regional tier of French football, the Stade de l'Epopée looks vastly out of place, and the club would need three promotions before the league status of the football club would match the surroundings.

Calais are in a good place to achieve one of those promotions this season, leading the table by two points going into the final day of the season today, although only the league winners would be guaranteed promotion and goal difference would mean that a draw would not be sufficient should Calais only draw and the second placed team, the Valenciennes B team, win. Their destiny shouldn't really be in their own hands though, as Valenciennes B inexplicably lost at home to lowly Wasquehal last time out after six straight wins which had put them in pole position

after Calais had had a bit of a wobble, claiming just five points from their four games previous to winning at Sedan B last weekend. On paper, Calais couldn't have asked for a better fixture to claim the required three points today, at home to already relegated SC Douai, although they did win 3-0 at home last weekend to Sedan B. A further addition to the sense of occasion today was that this would be the last game before retirement for Cedric Schille, veteran of the Calais team that reached the French Cup final back in 2000 and of the rollercoaster of Calais' fortunes in the 14 years.

Prior to the game was quite an appropriate array of entertainment including dancers and pom-pom girls, although in the early stages of the game, it did appear that the occasion had got to the Calais players, as Douai more than looked a match for their hosts, and indeed had more attacks on goal. Gradually Calais did manage to impose themselves on the game, and on 36 minutes they scored the all-important opening goal, with a firm header by an unmarked Judicaël Briesmalien, Calais' captain, from 12 yards. Not much changed with the pattern of play though, as half time came and went with surprisingly not much to choose between the two teams. News at half time of Valenciennes losing their game at Arras by 0-1 meant that Calais' result may not actually matter.

Calais did look stronger and stronger after the break, with Douai barely posing a threat although the situation would remain precarious unless Calais could score a second goal. It looked very precarious indeed when Douai thought they had scored an equaliser, but it was ruled out after consultation with the lineswoman for handball in the approach play. On 78 minutes, Calais finally scored a second goal when a one-on-one effort hit the post, but Franky N'Guekam showed good composure in evading the attention of some defenders before firing into the net. This was an absolutely pivotal goal, as it allowed Calais to finally relax and Douai completely threw in the towel from this point forward. Calais scored their third on two minutes later when the ball was played back to Damien Bercuwe just inside the penalty area, who slammed the ball onto the underside of the crossbar and it bounced just over the line. Three minutes later and Schille was given an emotional standing ovation as he was substituted for what turned out to be a perfect day for him on his final appearance - a clean sheet as his team would soon be crowned champions. Two minutes from time, Calais scored a fourth when Maurice Sankhare scored a simple header at the far post from a couple of yards out. A pitch invasion greeted the final whistle as Calais had done what they had to do to clinch the title and promotion to the Championnat de France Amateur, although news came through that Valenciennes B had lost heavily at Arras by 0-4. Considering how the very existence of Calais RUFC was in serious doubt back in July, to be Champions by the end of the season was a very good effort by Calais. The final score-line today may have been rather harsh on Douai, who for 75 minutes looked more than a match for the Champions-elect, but it became a reasonable score-line considering the way Douai seemed to lost all interest and desire after conceding the second goal.

