

**TT No.3: *Justin Holmes*** - Saturday 17th July 2010; **Calais Racing Union v Gillingham**; Pre-season Friendly; Venue: Stade Julien Denis, Calais; Result: Score 0-4; Programme: N/A; Attendance: 700 (estimate); Match Rating: 3.

For today's football action, I followed the well-trodden path of those seeking the "closest to home" taste of European football, to watch Gillingham's pre-season friendly in Calais. For many reasons, it was quite a surprise that this game even went ahead. When Gillingham made the trip to Calais last pre-season, the field of play apparently more resembled something of a warzone, with several Gillingham players picking up injuries having been on the receiving end of some crude lunges by Calais players and the then manager Mark Stimson vowed never to return - a change of manager since presumably made today's rematch possible. Furthermore, last month, Calais went into liquidation although they soon reformed, and surprisingly were allowed to remain in the same league as they played last season - the Championnat de France Amateur 2 (CFA2) - although they should have been promoted having been Champions last season. And finally, there was much confusion about when this game would actually kick off - Gillingham advertised 3pm right up to and including the day before the match, whilst Calais continually advertised a 5pm kick off. Gillingham claimed that they were unable to contact Calais officials on Friday afternoon to confirm the kick off time, and indeed the Gillingham team arrived well in advance of the 3pm kick off time that they were expecting, whilst the home team did not arrive at the stadium until 3.45. A quarter of an hour later and the match kicked off at 4pm, which meant that nearly all of the home support was streaming through the turnstiles at half-time, unaware of the very late change of kick-off time. A quite farcical situation.

Although Calais moved to the modern and impressive all-seater Stade de l'Epopée less than two years ago, this match was switched to the club's former home stadium (although it still hosts Calais' reserve team games), the ageing and somewhat run-down, Stade Julien Denis, which is located about a 40 minute walk from the ferry port, or 20 minutes' walk eastwards from the town centre. The stadium has one bench seated stand along one touchline, with covered shallow terracing along the other side, and with open terracing behind either goal. A major minus point of the stadium is high mesh fencing around the pitch. The stadium has a very rundown look to it, not unreasonably considering it is no longer Calais' principal stadium, although one has the impression that this stadium would be more than adequate for the level that Calais's first team is now playing at. Indeed, the new 12,000 capacity Stade de l'Epopée is something of a white elephant in a regional amateur league and the stadium is quite a sad indication of how Calais' fortunes have nosedived in recent years - at the time the stadium was planned and built, Calais were in the third tier league Championnat National, looking upwards and looking to build on their famous Coupe de France final appearance at the turn of the century. Unsurprisingly, there was a large contingent of Gillingham fans making the short trip across the Channel, making the most of a novel day out

following their team, easily outnumbering the home support and providing constant loud support of their team. Entrance was a bargain equivalent to £1.70, but amazingly the local fans even complained that that was too much - one wonders what they would make of comparable teams charging at least three times that even for friendlies in England! As is customary in France, no programmes were issued.

At the time this fixture was arranged, it would have been anticipated that this would be a close encounter between two seemingly evenly matched teams. However, with Calais having to build again from scratch, one feared that Calais would be of their depth against a professional outfit, and so it proved in the early stages, as Gillingham raced into a two goal lead within 7 minutes thanks to some shambolic defending, and a three goal lead with half an hour on the clock. The only real surprise was that Gillingham didn't score several more by half time, although Calais did have a shot acrobatically cleared off the line. Gillingham did manage to extend their lead to four within five minutes of the restart, however the remainder of the game was quite even, perhaps not surprisingly given the obligatory frequent substitutions, and Calais could consider themselves very unlucky to not get onto the scoresheet having had another shot blocked on the line and a rasping drive tipped onto the crossbar. Whilst today's game did not have the apparent nastiness of last year's encounter, the Calais players were still often guilty of cynical fouls, and the frequent pushing and shoving between individual players, as well as a mass brawl midway through the first half were of little surprise.

So a comfortable victory for Gillingham, and although the quality of the opposition may have been something of a disappointment, and the physical bordering on cynical tactics of the French players may have been a frequent concern for the Gillingham management, this was surely a worthwhile exercise for Gillingham, with the squad benefitting from an excellent team bonding exercise and the fans being able to enjoy an altogether different day out following their team.

07/20