

TT No.55: Keith Aslan - Sat 18th September 2010; Kick-Off: 10.34am; **City Church** v Selly Oak Methodist; West Midlands Christian League Division 1; Admission/Prog: Free; Result: 3-1; Att: 14 (6 home; 7 away & 1 neutral).

Whilst I doubt the West Midlands Christian League is top of many groundhoppers "to do" list, it really is a little gem with Saturday morning kick offs making it an ideal prelude to a game in the afternoon. A ten-minute train service from Birmingham sees you at Bournville from where City Church's ground is a 14-minute walk. The area is dwarfed by the massive chocolate factory and all the station signage says 'Bournville for Cadburys World' suggesting most people alighting here are looking forward to a day of chocolate themed entertainment. Even as you walk towards the ground you pass rows and rows of very pleasant houses that Mr. Cadbury built for his employees.

You will approach the ground in Heath Road on the right, but ignore this and keep on walking for about 100 yards where your first port of call on the opposite side of the road is Rowhedge Pavilion. Here are the changing rooms but more importantly here too is the secretary carrying a bag of programmes for which he refuses to take any money. It also contains a glorious little cafe run by the church. Don't have breakfast before you arrive as you won't have room for the gargantuan bacon sandwiches. I can personally vouch for them, the flapjacks, the dinky cakes with lemon icing, the coffee and the nice young lady serving them. Feeding my face with a programme in hand is as probably as close to heaven as I'm likely to get. And what a programme it is: 12 pages, fixtures, results, league table, article on the opposition and the league, manager's notes, secretary's notes, bible quotations and a page entitled "Great foreigners in the Premiership" although alas no mention of Chelsea's Dutch legend, Winston Bogarde!

I quote from the league history "...it has welcomed Non-Christian players into its fold in the hope that not only will they enjoy the core values it stands for, but their presence will also prevent the league from being inward looking and exclusive" which I thought was rather good and a laid back attitude that certain other religions would do well to copy. The league is obviously very well run, producing a seasons fixtures when some leagues higher up the pyramid can only work them out monthly. Also, I was surprised to see three officials, which is the norm I was told. I was particularly amused by the fixture page which showed the days opposition as "Selly Oak Meths" which may have ambiguous connotations in some circles!?

The standard of football was no worse than I watch most weeks with the only difference being a total lack of swearing which was very refreshing. Otherwise Christian footballers do all the 'naughties' that heathen players do. The first half was goalless, notable for a mass brawl towards the end. A home player who clearly was on holiday when his bible class did the bit about turning the other cheek, got himself sent off for retaliation. Half time was remarkably short, with both teams

trotting out unrequested after less than five minutes. I suppose if you take the swear words out of the managers half time team-talk they don't last very long. Normally this would be good, but in this instance, I was disappointed not to have time for a refuelling visit to the cafe.

The man disadvantage spurred on City Church who took a two-goal lead early in the second half. Numerical parity was then restored when the Selly Oak goalkeeper was sent off. No idea why but assume it was for dissent. Having a man sent off clearly galvanises teams in this league and Selly Oak soon reduced the arrears with a penalty, apparently for hand ball but it passed me by, as did quite a bit in this game which I put down to having to get up early! City Church made the game safe with a third 15 minutes from time to end up deserved winners.

At the final whistle both teams gave each other three cheers which I thought was rather nice and took me back to my school days. Special mention goes to the Selly Oak no. 3 who is either colour blind, or making some bizarre fashion statement, for he played the whole game wearing one blue sock and one white one.

This was an excellent morning's entertainment and details of City Church's fixtures can be found on their superb website. The ground is very central for anywhere in the West Midlands, I went to Stretton Eagles in the afternoon, they play at Burton on Trent and I was at the ground one and a half hours before kick-off. The curse free morning was more than compensated for at this match.

07/20