

TT No.72: *Justin Holmes* - Tuesday 21st September 2010; **Flora Tallinn v FK Suduva**; Baltic League; Venue: A. Le Coq Arena, Tallinn; Score: 2-1; Admission: 50 EEK; Programme: Free; Attendance: 150; Rating: 4.

After moving on from Helsinki to Tallinn, the very pleasant capital city of Estonia, I planned to take in what to me was an interesting looking match in the Baltic League - a competition played between the six best teams in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, played on a two-leg knock out basis, with FK Suduva of Lithuania coming to Tallinn. The locals clearly didn't share my interest. After about a half hour walk from my accommodation in central Tallinn to the A. Le Coq Arena, it was hard to imagine a more unpromising scene when I arrived at the ground an hour before kick-off, with almost nobody around and with no lights on in the stadium or doors open - no indication of a game taking place this evening.

Half an hour before kick-off and the atmosphere was still quite surreal, still with hardly anyone present, but at least the floodlights being on and the TV camera crews present seeming to prove that I had indeed got the right day and time for this fixture. To continue the understated theme, I bought my ticket from an elderly couple at a table adjacent to the one entrance door that had finally opened. Fifteen minutes before kick-off and I still could have counted the attendance on one pair of hands and the final total was just 150, which would be about average for an Estonian league game. Four-page programmes were also handed out with admission, helpfully printed in English - giving basic information on the tournament and both teams - indeed, English appears to be the "lingua franca" for the tournament, with all announcements in English, as well as in Estonian and Lithuanian.

As for the stadium, it is a reasonably impressive facility, as one might expect of a stadium that is home to the Estonian national football team as well as Flora Tallinn, that was only opened in 2001. The all-seater stadium, with unobstructed views and plenty of legroom throughout, has a pleasant and fairly unusual design to it, all four sides have two tiers, although only three sides have cover. For today's game, one could roam anywhere around the stadium apart from the uncovered end and the upper tiers. As often is the case, having such a small attendance inside a 10,000-capacity stadium does provoke a rather surreal feeling, but a group of about 20 Flora fans certainly did their best to generate some good support from behind one of the goals. FK Suduva appeared to have only brought one supporter, who positioned himself with a flag in a corner of the ground - at the end of the game, it was nice to see the team walk over to applaud him.

Flora Tallinn, Estonia's biggest and most successful team since the country's independence in 1991, certainly came into this match in fantastic form, having been unbeaten in their last 23 domestic games, winning their last 11 matches in a row, and notching 20 goals without reply in their last four games, and were unbeaten in their previous 23 matches before that in domestic football. They also

reached the semi-finals of last season's Baltic League, being eliminated by the eventual winners, Ventspils, of Latvia. This match would be a tough test though against FK Suduva, of Lithuania, with Lithuanian teams generally considered to be stronger than those from Estonia, and last season they were beaten finalists in the Baltic League.

The first half was quite a cagey affair, a quite typical first leg game where the fear of losing the first game outweighs any ambition to take a lead into the second leg. For all that, it was still a reasonably entertaining and competitive half. Flora started the second half in a more attack minded spirit and got their rewards on 56 minutes, when Kart Palatu opened the scoring. He doubled Flora's advantage on 77 minutes, to seemingly set Flora on the road to take a comfortable lead to Lithuania for the return leg in early November, particularly as Suduva had already had Povilas Lukšys sent off for two quick yellow cards in between Flora's two goals. But, as so often is the case in these two legged games, the tie suddenly turned on its head when Suduva score an away goal thanks to an awful goal from Flora's perspective, their goalkeeper spilling a low cross and Andrius Urbsys slid in and just beat the defender to poke the ball over the line from a yard. The narrow score-line sets the tie up nicely for the return leg in Lithuania, with Flora taking a one goal lead but with FK Suduva having an away goal.

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