

TT No.73: *Justin Holmes* - Wednesday 22nd September 2010; **HJK Helsinki** v FC Inter Turku; Finnish Veikkausliiga; Venue: Sonera Stadium, Helsinki; Score: 2-2; Admission: €12; Programme: Free; Attendance: 3150; Rating: 4.

After travelling back from Tallinn to Helsinki on the catamaran in the morning, the final game of my stay was to watch by far the biggest and most successful team in Finland - and indeed reigning champions of the Veikkausliiga and comfortably leading the table this season with just four games remaining - HJK Helsinki. The Sonera Stadium - until last month known as the Finnair Stadium, a change of sponsorship causing a change of the stadium name, a perfect example of why naming stadia after sponsors is, in my opinion, unsatisfactory - is located about a half hour walk from central Helsinki (with trams also available), and is located very close to the Olympic Stadium, home of the Finnish national team. Indeed, the Olympic Stadium has an observation tower built into it and I would certainly recommend a trip to top of this tower for fantastic views of the Olympic Stadium, the Sonera Stadium, as well as the city of Helsinki. I would also recommend a visit to the excellent Sports Museum of Finland, also built into the Olympic Stadium, which houses some fascinating exhibits for all Finnish sports, with an obvious (but not exclusive) focus on Olympic sports.

I bought my ticket on-line for this game, which was not necessary but afforded a three-Euro reduction of the price of the ticket, with a glossy eight-page programme available to be picked up just inside the turnstile for free. The all-seater Sonera Stadium has quite an interesting design, with three sides joined with a fairly low roof with unobstructed views throughout and with the back of the stands being open, allowing reasonably good views of the game for free from the adjacent hill. The fourth, main stand is a much larger construction, the cover of which extends far beyond the seating, to also provide cover for those entering the ground or at a refreshment kiosk. Apparently, this stand even has heated seats and a heated roof, but I was sat in the opposite stand. The pitch is one of the sometimes, controversial plastic variety - slightly surprising considering football is a summer sport in Finland and so not exposed to the harsh winter conditions.

HJK Helsinki would certainly have had to have been favourites to win this game, considering that they were closing in on winning the league, being five points clear of second placed FC Honka, although they have choked in recent weeks, taking only two wins from their last seven games. Today's visitors, FC Inter Turku, had been in similar form, and were anchored firmly in mid-table, in sixth place in the 14 team league and with only very faint hopes of reaching fourth place and Europa League qualification, which they did manage this season through winning the Finnish FA Cup last season.

After an even opening half hour to the game, all four goals of the game were scored in a quite crazy eight-minute period between the 31st and 39th minutes. HJK opened the scoring when a free kick was headed towards goal and Mattias

Lindström just beat the keeper to the ball to head Helsinki in front. Almost from the restart, HJK won the ball back and doubled their lead when a low cross into the box was cutely flicked towards goal for an easy tap in at the far post for Erfan Zenellu from a yard out. This was harsh on the visitors, and the quick fire double seemed to deflate them as HJK took full control of the game. However, on 37 minutes, Inter Turku pulled a goal back when a cross was missed by the HJK defenders and goalkeeper, with the ball falling to Henri Lehtonen who somehow managed to find the net from the edge of the six-yard box almost on the touchline. Two minutes later and Inter were suddenly back on level terms through a controversial goal. The HJK goalkeeper carried the ball out of the box, but it certainly looked like he only did this as he was fouled by an Inter player. Nevertheless, a free kick to Inter was awarded just wide of the penalty area, which was played low into the box and turned into the net through a crowd of players by Severi Paajanen. After this, the game reverted to a much calmer affair, with the second half for the most part even. HJK certainly had the better chances to win the game, but overall a draw was a fair reflection on the game. Any disappointment at dropping two points was replaced by huge cheers came when news came through that near neighbours and chief challengers for the title, FC Honka, had lost. Indeed, the HJK fans generated a very good, positive atmosphere despite a modest (but normal for HJK and better than most other Finnish teams) attendance of 3150, and all in all a visit to the Sonera Stadium can be warmly recommended as an enjoyable experience.

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