

**TT No.80: *Justin Holmes*** - Sat 2nd October 2010; **Cliftonville** v Donegal Celtic; (Northern) Irish Premiership; Venue: The Solitude, Belfast; Score: 4-2; Admission: £10.00; Programme: £2.00; Match Rating: 4.

For my latest daytrip to Northern Ireland - and one which threatens to be the last for some time, considering Ryanair's disappointing decision to withdraw all services from Belfast - I managed to chalk off a ground that I have intended to visit for some time, but for a variety of reasons - most recently the big freeze, the ash cloud, and a game moved for television purposes - has always proved elusive. A trip to Solitude, home of Cliftonville, who claim to be the oldest football club in all Ireland, also gained a further attractive dimension with the recent installation of a 3G synthetic pitch - today's game would be just the second since it was installed.

The Solitude is as easy to get to as all Belfast clubs are from Belfast City Airport. A 15-minute bus journey into central Belfast, then a further fifteen-minute bus journey to north-west Belfast, with the bus service 12a helpfully stopping a stone's throw away from the stadium - a day ticket covering all bus journeys costing £2.90. There is no doubting that Solitude is a mixture of the traditional and new, but the combination is far from seamless. Behind both goals are modern seated stands, and it is quite unusual that all the modernising efforts have so far been confined to the areas behind the goals. Along one length of the pitch, where spectators enter the stadium, is a large old-fashioned stand which is certainly showing its age. Indeed, it is hardly used, the seating area not in use today but with the clubhouse located on the ground floor. Underneath the stand is a shallow terrace area, with a high fence that one has to look through to watch the action. Not a particularly pleasant area to be watching football, I found. The opposite side is an out-of-bounds, overgrown area. The Solitude has a surprisingly scenic backdrop to it, with large hills close by. The programme was a very good effort, attractive, in full colour, printed on good quality material and contained plenty of information about both teams. Probably the best publication I have encountered in the Irish Premiership.

Cliftonville started the season strongly, winning their first three games, although they have picked up just three points from five games since. They will have been particularly disappointed to have lost their last home game against Coleraine, the first game on their newly installed plastic pitch, and their first game back at the Solitude this season. Donegal Celtic are new to the Irish Premiership this season, having been promoted via the play-offs last season, and life has been somewhat of a struggle for them in the top flight, with poor early results resulting in the manager being sacked a month ago and they are still languishing down in eleventh place in the twelve team league. With Donegal Celtic based in west Belfast, this game was a local derby between the two Belfast clubs traditionally drawing a Nationalist support.

On a mild day occasionally sunny but mostly cloudy, Cliftonville were the stronger side throughout, but it was fair to say the referee did not cover himself in glory with his performance particularly in the first half, awarding a very harsh penalty to Cliftonville when the ball bounced up quickly to strike Declan O'Hara's hand - on his return to Solitude after moving from Cliftonville after six years there in the summer. The penalty was duly dispatched by George McMullen, sending the keeper the wrong way. 7 minutes later, and Donegal Celtic were awarded a penalty of their own, apparently for shirt pulling. Nobody saw it, not even the Donegal Celtic players appealed for a penalty and after a few seconds of confusion, it slowly dawned on everyone that a penalty had been given and the defender was shown the yellow card - a classic example of if that apparent offence were to be given consistently, there would be a dozen penalties in every match. Paul McVeigh converted the penalty coolly, and then proceeded to antagonise the local fans - not that fans at Northern Irish games need any encouragement to be passionate at the best of times. The half drew to a close with the Cliftonville manager, Eddie Patterson, being sent to the stands having stepped over the line after increasingly bizarre and inconsistent decisions by the referee, but shortly afterwards and on the stroke of half time, Cliftonville regained the lead through Stephen Garrett with a firm shot after some ping-pong football around the box.

In the second half, Cliftonville had chance after chance to put this game to bed, and it looked like they were going to be made to pay for their profligacy when Paul McVeigh scored his second to equalise for Donegal Celtic, bundling the ball in at the far post on 66 minutes. However, Cliftonville restored their lead within a minute and after continuing to squander chance after chance, they finally sealed the win with a fourth goal from young substitute Rory Donnelly, heading in from close range.

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