

TT No.140: Justin Holmes - Sat 7th January 2012; **Reading** v Stevenage; FA Cup Third Round; Venue: Madejski Stadium, Reading; Score: 0-1; Admn: £12.00; Prog: £3.00; Attendance: 11295; Match Rating: 2.

It was a fairly late decision to take in the magic of the FA Cup on Third Round day today. The match, in truth, was not one to potentially set the pulses racing, with the favourites at home against a team in just one division below, however bargain ticket prices made watching league football teams at a stadium I had not previously visited for the price that Conference South teams generally charge made a trip to Berkshire sufficiently attractive.

The modestly named Madejski Stadium is located almost three miles south of Reading rail station, close to the M4, and many buses are available to ferry supporters. Set above a retail park, it is attractively designed outside and inside, and certainly has more character and uniqueness than other recently built stadia. It has seating all around with ample leg room and no obstructions, and is single tiers around three quarters of the stadium, with the remaining West Stand being two tiered. A slight wave design to the roof and a gap between the top of the stand and the roof certainly enhances the look of the ground. The programme, which unusually was a full edition for a cup match, was typical glossy Football League fare, but it ranks as one of the better ones, with plenty of interesting articles to read, although complete match reports of every FA Cup match played by the club in the last two seasons during their decent cup runs was rather tiresome.

Today's match would be between sides in good form in the Football League. Before losing last time out at Cardiff on Monday, Reading won their previous four games, and had won six out of seven, which has propelled them up to fifth in the Championship, albeit eight points behind the top two. They also have excellent recent pedigree in the FA Cup, reaching the Quarter-Finals in the last two seasons, when they have claimed the scalps of Premier League Liverpool, Burnley, West Bromwich Albion, and Everton. Graham Westley, Stevenage's manager, is not everyone's cup of tea, least of all mine, but there is no denying he is doing a quite remarkable job at the Hertfordshire club, taking them from non-league football to a play-off berth in League One, in sixth place. Their recent form has been very similar to Reading's - before losing at home to Leyton Orient last time out on Monday, they won their previous three games and were unbeaten in thirteen games. Reading and Stevenage were also drawn together in last season's competition, with Reading winning 2-1 at Stevenage thanks to a late goal in the fourth round.

On a bright, sunny afternoon, Reading were desperately disappointing throughout, as they appeared lethargic with precious little cohesion in their play, whilst Stevenage hustled and harried, made interceptions and always looked the stronger and more likely side to score. On 21 minutes they deservedly took the lead when

Darius Charles took the ball just outside the area and unleashed a low drive into the corner beyond the reach of the keeper. The only surprise at half time was that Stevenage had not increased their lead, with Reading having just one sight of goal.

Reading improved slightly after the break and managed to create some half chances, although it wasn't until the final 25 minutes that Reading finally started to mount some sustained attacks on goals, but still they never managed to create any gilt-edged chances, and indeed, it was Stevenage who came closest to scoring ten minutes from time when a powerful low drive was just turned aside by Adam Federici in the Reading goal. However, it was Stevenage who deservedly progressed to the fourth round and gain revenge for last season's defeat to Reading. Reading were desperately disappointing on the day, very surprisingly given their recent good form and pedigree in the FA Cup, but now they can concentrate fully on pushing for promotion back to the Premier League.

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