

TT No.192: Justin Holmes - Saturday 17th March 2012; **Ross County v Falkirk**; Scottish League First Division; Venue: Victoria Park, Dingwall; Result: 2-1; Admn: £14.00; Programme: £2.00; Att: 4.302; Match Rating: 3.

When Easyjet had their 20% off sale a few months back, a flight to Inverness was the most attractive. I had already visited the home of Inverness Caledonian Thistle, so the target would be a trip north from Inverness to the small town of Dingwall, to visit the home of Ross County. At the time of booking, Ross County looked well placed to push on for the fabulous achievement of belatedly following their near neighbours Inverness from the Highland League into the Scottish Premier League, with this game against their main rivals for the title, Falkirk. Fast forward a couple of months and the scenario still remains now, although Ross had by now carved out an even more commanding lead above Falkirk. It would be a game Falkirk would simply have to win to have any realistic small chance of denying Ross County the title.

Having arrived at Inverness airport in the morning, a zone two bus ticket for £5.50 enabled me to get to Inverness city centre and catch a connecting bus for the 15-mile trip north west to Dingwall. On arrival in the town, it was hard to imagine that such a small, sleepy, old fashioned market town is on the brink of becoming home to a Scottish Premier League outfit - to emphasise the point, the town of Dingwall has less inhabitants than the small 5,800 capacity of Victoria Park. Located a five-minute walk from the town's train station, just slightly more from the town centre, Victoria Park has quite a new feel about it. Along one touchline is an all-seater stand, while another all-seater stand is situated on the other touch line, this one only straddling the middle third though. Behind one goal is covered terracing, and there is a section of uncovered terracing between the covered terrace and the smaller stand. Behind the other goal is uncovered terracing, where the away fans are located. I chose to stand on the covered terrace behind the goal, as this would be where the passionate support would be, but also because the terrace will soon be consigned to history, as Ross County will be converting Victoria Park to an all-seater stadium in order to comply with Scottish Premier League regulations in the close season. The 32-page programme was a very good read and sensibly priced.

There was surely little prospect of Ross County challenging for promotion at the start of this season, having finished one place above the relegation places last season, and opening this season with a goalless draw and a 1-5 drubbing at Hamilton Academical. Remarkably, that was the last time Ross County have been defeated in the league, and they have now gone 25 games without defeat, and have been top of the table since mid-October. Falkirk have been their closest challengers since October, only for one week dropping below second since, and they have lost just once of their last twelve league games. Too many of those games have draws though, which has meant that Falkirk found themselves twelve

points behind Ross coming into this game. In the three previous encounters between the two teams this season, both games at Falkirk were drawn 1-1, whilst Ross won 3-1 in Dingwall.

On a bright, sunny afternoon, played in front of a packed and vociferous home support, it was the home side who dominated the opening exchanges with a confidence one would expect from a team in their position. On fifteen minutes, Falkirk made a tough task all the more tough when defender Stephen Kingsley played a poor back-pass to his keeper Michael McGovern, who tripped the Ross forward Colin McMenamin as he raced for the ball. A penalty was awarded and McGovern, who had moved from Ross to Falkirk last summer, was shown the red card, with youth team keeper Graham Bowman coming on for his league debut. Richard Brittain smashed the penalty home to give the home side, which provoked a streaker from the Falkirk end. Ten minutes later and Ross doubled their lead, when a cross was only half cleared and Rocco Quinn blasted home from 15 yards from a fairly narrow angle. The only surprise for the rest of the first half was that Ross did not increase their lead further, as they completed dominated proceedings, and Falkirk looked a surprisingly poor side, not managing a single effort on goal throughout the first half.

At half time, it looked game over, perhaps not just for today but for the title race too, and the second half started off in a similar vein. However, on the hour mark, Falkirk were suddenly back in the game, as Michael Millar hit a glorious 30-yard free kick into the top corner. Inexplicably, Ross seemed to go into their shells after they conceded, and one had the strong feeling that sooner or later, Falkirk would score an equaliser. However, eight minutes from time, they shot themselves in the foot again, when their top scorer Farid El Alagui was sent off for a second yellow card. Even down to nine men, Falkirk still looked capable of snatching an equaliser as Ross looked nervous, but it was Ross who held on to claim the three points, to extend their lead over Falkirk and Dundee to 15 points. With only 27 points left to play for now second placed Dundee, it would take a monumental collapse for Ross County not to be promoted to the Scottish Premier League.

It was somewhat surprising to read the Falkirk manager, Stephen Pressley, claim after the match that his team was the only one trying to play football and criticized Ross County for relying on the long ball game. There was little to support this on today's showing, as his side were desperately poor in the first half and only came back into the game when Ross seemed to get the jitters following a world-class free-kick to get Falkirk back in the game. Enormous credit instead should go to Ross County, a club that is clearly very well organized on and off the pitch.

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