

TT No.193: Paul Roth - Sunday 18th March 2012; **ENTENTE SPORTIVE GUINES** vs. ETOILE SPORTIVE BULLY; Nord Pas-de-Calais Seniors Promotion Honneur Ligue, Poule 'A'; Res: 3-1; Att: 125; Entry: 4 Euros; Weather: Sunny and pleasantly warm.

Periodically it crosses my mind what it'd be like - from a groundhopping perspective - to live in central England, in Leicestershire say, or Nottinghamshire. The world, as far as football is concerned, would be my oyster. I could be in Scotland in a couple of hours, Wales in half that time and the realm's furthest-flung counties that I seldom visit would be virtually walkable.

That's not to say living on Kent's south eastern tip doesn't have advantages. It has a lot going for it, not least being next to the seaside. We benefit from fantastic scenery, sandy beaches, beautiful coastal walks with open countryside right on our doorstep. Of course, our friends and family, and our beloved animals are congregated hereabouts. Road and rail links on the whole are good, with Thanet boasting a daily ferry service to Belgium. Despite all the above, I concede I'm not best placed when it comes to British groundhopping. Continental 'hopping' however is a different matter altogether; for that I'm in pole position. Once La Manche has been negotiated, options football-wise are limitless.

The Seismologist - the soles of Alan's feet are ultra-sensitive, enabling him to detect the merest fasciculation in the earth's crust - and I have been travelling together to watch football in the Nord Pas-de-Calais region (we've also ventured south-westwards to view games in Picardie; plus one in Ostend, Belgium) for a while now, and to-date have hardly scratched the surface of what's on offer. Fortuitously for us the vast majority of games in this part of the world take place on Sunday afternoons, meaning that a sojourn au Francais never impinges on each other's weekend footballing agenda.

As if we needed an incentive, P&O are currently offering return day-trips for £23 (£29 on Saturdays). This bargain includes 6 bottles of Gallo wine - you can mix and match the colour - plus a bogof 7-piece breakfast. Factor in the price of a litre of diesel in France - up to 30p cheaper - and you soon realise you'd be silly to spurn such a money-saving deal.

As I didn't want to drive far once the other side the town of Guines, only 15km from the port's exit, fitted this remit to a tee. ES Guines' Nord Pas-de-Calais Seniors Promotion Honneur Poule 'A' match versus ES Bully was also to be our first look at French league football at this level - we have previously witnessed matches of higher and lower stature, and numerous cup ties.

The first successful balloon crossing of the English Channel landed in Guines, and is the market town's chief claim to fame; Jean-Pierre Blanchard's historic achievement of 1785 is commemorated by a column erected at the exact spot where the pioneering aviator's craft touched down.

After a fill-up of precious liquid - diesel mes amis, diesel; okay, and a leisurely glass of sweet-tasting Karmeliet Tripel in the centrally-located Golden Lion auberge - it was time for football. Ground-wise we knew what was in store for us, as we'd recce'd ES Guines' Leo Lagrange facility (many of the Republic's sporting arenas bear the former Under-Secretary for Sport's moniker - he even has a Paris Metro station named after him) a few years before, en-route to a Coupe de France tie at Audruicq.

Located at the end of Rue Leo Lagrange on the settlement's easterly aspect, your eye after ingress is immediately drawn to the grandiose covered tribune running the length of the stadium's west side. Entrance by the way cost 4 Euros, which included a drink of your choice; female attendees, as in the Seniors DH and DHR leagues, get in free on Sundays. The arena doesn't have floodlights, although surprisingly the adjacent 'B' pitch and cinder athletic track-cum football ground does. Encapsulated by a concrete post and rail surround, the verdant pitch was in excellent condition despite the heavy overnight rain.

Perusing the interior of the typically French Buvet, we were introduced to Guines' president: Pierre Michaux, along with his cohorts, welcomed us with such friendliness that we can hereby vouch that the Entente between our two great nations is indeed still positively cordial.

With Guines and Bully before kick-off placed respectively in 7th and 9th spot in the 12-team division, our expectations of a thrill-a-minute extravaganza weren't high (they never are in France). Our pessimism was quickly to be proved misplaced. The yellow and black-uniformed homesters flew out of the proverbial traps, taking the lead inside the first minute; from then on, a feisty, rather un-French football match ensued. Two headers in the match's final quarter tripled their advantage, before the eponymously named visitors from the north's ex-coal mining region had a player sent-off. Perversely it was then that they managed a last-minute consolation.

As our excursions French-side go this was up there. Not so far enough 'up there' for me to say the experience exactly made the earth move - although apparently it did for Alan.....twice!

FGIF Star Rating: 5*.

07/20