

TT No.247: Paul Roth - Thursday May 17th 2012; Coup de France 2012/13, Nord Pas-de-Calais Region, First Round. **UNION SPORTIVE HONDSCHOOTE** vs. RACING CLUB HERZEELE; Res: 3-1; Att: 60; Entry: N/A; Stade Michel Chautard, Rue de Bergues, Hondshoote, is at latitude 50 degrees, 58.5 mins N; 2 degrees, 34.8 mins E (position derived from centre circle); Weather: Overcast, but stiflingly warm; My day's carbon footprint legacy: 13.7.

With one eye firmly focused on the 2014 Winter Olympics, the French Ministry for Youth Affairs and Sports' fiat, issued just before Christmas, that the initial round of the 2012/13 Coupe de France be played during the preceding summer months, to negate any bi-lateral overlap, makes an awful lot of sense.

Naturally for the Seismologist and I, the opportunity to take in such an unusually early cup fixture was one that couldn't be spurned. The question is.....does this CdF match count as my final game of this season, or the first of next?

To add spice and 'arama' to proceedings, I set my friend the task of finding us a tie to attend within a 89-mile radius of Calais' port, asking him not to tell me where it was we were headed: also, to take us somewhere unusual, i.e. a club with either a strange-sounding name or one that looked to have the most meagre or most shambolic facilities. The upshot being, when we departed these shores, right up until the time we arrived (at one stage I'd considered allowing Mr. Quake to blindfold me for the last few miles, whilst he controlled the car's steering mechanism and diverse synchromesh gearing systems: correctly, my stabile cohort deemed this foolhardy brainstorm.....and I quote "Dangerous beyond belief; bloody lunacy"), I was clueless as to where I was going. Without a doubt this was going to be the most unique groundhopping experience of my life.

Country's cup competitions range in diversity in their constitution, but I'm hazarding a guess France's provides the most clubs with an opportunity to participate (7,422 last season - or is that this season - compared to 825 in England's FA Cup and just 84 in Spain's Copa del Rey) in any such national tournament. With 262 First Round ties taking place over nine days during May in this Nord Pas-de-Calais section alone, you could say we were spoilt for choice (138 of the rubbers were played today).

Being Ascension Day, therefore a public holiday in France, and realising there wasn't much worth watching on DAVE, the two of us deemed this as felicitous an occasion as any to travel Republic-wards. I'm a pretty laid-back sort of chap, and can put my hand on my heart and say that at no stage did I harangue the esteemed organiser to try and extricate from him the location of our terminus. However, I do concede on my part there was a minuscule hint of expectancy; a palpable sense of adventure; a mind-boggling frenzy of longing; an electrical frisson, coursing down my spinal cord as we set sail across those cerulean waters of the English Channel,

aboard the Spirit of Kyrgyzstan. The nerves were jangling still further on disembarkation, as I obeyed barked instructions to follow what turned out to be a magical mystery tour of unparalleled proportions.

A torturous, sweat-inducing meander thus began, taking us initially to the impressive Stade du Souvenir, the home of Stade Olympique Calais, who later in the afternoon were hosting Union Sportive Ambleteuse in one of the many ties.

Alas, this was not journey's end; far from it. After refuelling, we were soon headed in the opposite direction, towards Flanders, and the unexpectedly well-appointed home of Union Sportive Coudekerque; Stade Auguste Delaune, easily spottable from the A16, had been on my friend's shortlist of seventy, but that team's match versus Union Sportive Bavinchove has been put back to Friday May 25th (anyone fancy it?). Onwards, but not necessarily upwards, Association Amateur Jeunesse Uxem was our next port of call; mercifully, that wasn't where we were headed either.

Finally, a few moments after 1.09pm, we attained Monsieur Quake's footballing Shangri-La au Francais. When the wheels of our erstwhile Maserati finally stopped rotating, and I saw where we'd rocked up, I almost shot my bolt.

Embracing my Japanese-speaking (Mr. Q is also fully commensurate with the vagaries of both Mandarin and Satsuma) sidekick in a clench of the damned, I tenderly kissed him on his left cheek, threw my hands in the air and exclaimed... "Sacre bleu; Mon dieu; mon dieu; Auchan, Auchan; Rang du Fliers"! In his own indomitable style, he had not fulfilled the brief, but had eked out something stupendous instead.

Stade Daniel Provoost, the home of Union Sportive Teteghem, is magnificent; there's no other word for it. What an inspired choice! Hemmed in by hedges and tightly shoe-horned into the centre of town, a small grandstand occupies its south-easterly flank, with a small clubhouse located behind the High Street end. The arena is adorned with breath-taking floodlights, and with clipped bushes picking out the club's moniker on the encampment's changing room flank, my feeling was that a superb afternoon's entertainment lay ahead (even more so as the arcanelly-named Dunkerque Dockers were Teteghem's 1st Round opponents).

So why did we end up at Hondschoote (pronounced 'onz-cot')? To our chagrin, the pitch that had all the facilities surrounding it is 5G, and with an all-day Festival of football taking place upon it, the cup match was scheduled to take place on pitch 2, beyond the hedgerows. After surveying that gruesome vista for a few seconds, we stood motionless, jaws momentarily locked in a rictus of agonised bewilderment. No words contained in any lexicon, that are translatable from any language, could adequately have described how I felt at that precise moment. Compared to next door's aesthetic splendour, the paucity of what now lay before us was quickly deemed unacceptable.

Plan 'H' was immediately deployed, and within fifteen minutes our coupe was approaching the magnificent aforementioned 11th-century town. Located just a

mile south from Belgium's border, Hondschoote itself is an utter joy to behold. The decorous main square is dominated by the towering Hallekerque, whose 61-bell carillon jingles a merry little tune on the quarter. Wool-weaving, and the production of the finest serge, made the townsfolk hereabouts phenomenally wealthy, which is evident in the plethora of elegant buildings that proliferate.

Stade Michel Chautard, US Hondschoote's HQ, is easily found (or so we thought), being in situ near a restored windmill; that the town boasts two such structures inevitably meant we choose to head for the wrong one! Briefly flummoxed, and with kick-off time fast approaching, shortly afterwards we were driving past a padlocked stadium: panic-stricken described our sombre mood at this juncture.

Seconds later, Moulin deux appeared. Beside it sits the singularly most peerless football ground I have ever had the pleasure of stepping foot inside. Boasting a cinder track surround, with the playing area enclosed by a lichen-encrusted oval palisade, the spacious arena is a joy to behold. Other facilities include a de rigueur buvet - the edifice is fetchingly decorated inside in the club's colours of amber and black - and a covered stand that proffers a few steps of terracing. If the backdrop of the windmill, resplendent with its red, white and blue-painted sails wasn't spectacular enough, then in the stadium's furthest corner lies France's most northerly vineyard. This extraordinary piece of viticulture was pioneered by the club's former president, Bernard Decock, whose tenure lasted 10-years, from 1997 until 2007. Expect this year's vintage to possess not only overtones of peaches and cream; cherry blossom and wild honey, but also of ammonia. That caustic, burnt flavouring doubtlessly will pervade, given many of the visiting starlets were seen relieving themselves close by.

USH ply their trade in the Nord Pas-de-Calais, District Maritime Nord, Seniors 1ere Division, Poule B, where they currently command 3rd position. RCH, from just down the D167, turn out in the Seniors Deuxieme Division, Poule B, a division lower: at the time of writing they occupied 6th spot. I'm happy to stand corrected, but guess these regional leagues must equate to a level twelve or thirteen? The game that ensued patently represented the combatants' lowly status.

Herzeele's opening early in-off-a-post strike following a free-kick, had been cancelled out by a penalty for hand-ball on the stroke of teatime. The second-half was pretty much all one-way, as the homesters progressed to the round of the last 6,700 by a more-comfortable-than-it-looks margin of 3 goals to 1. For such a prestigious competition, it didn't seem right that only one official was officiating (I'm not usually critical of referees, but Mr. Herve Lamarlette was guilty of so many unfathomable decisions, at times it looked as if his mind was elsewhere). Club linesmen for a Coupe de France match looked incongruous to say the least.

Le Tirage for Round Two takes place at Lille OSC's new Grand Metropole stadium during early August; if I'll be able to contain myself until then is questionable. In the meantime, perchance my new bestseller....."From Hondschoote to Le Stade de France"???

In denouement, a truly memorable day, which hopefully we'll repeat in 2013/14! And let me just add this - if you're ever trying to locate a footballing venue that's either crummy or charming; dastardly or divine; heinous or heavenly; sordid or splendid, than I beseech you to seek Mr. Q's advice on the subject. He is undeniably the doyen of the depressing; the purveyor of the parlous; the seneschal of the sumptuous; the wizard of the wondrous, and as such comes with my highest recommendation.

FGIF Star Rating: 5*.

07/20