

TT No.6: *Justin Holmes* - Saturday 30th June 2011; **Havant and Waterlooville v Real Betis**; Pre-Season Friendly; Venue: Westleigh Park, Havant; Score: 0-7; Admn: £10.00; Programme: N/A; Att: 800 (est.); Match Rating: 4.

24 hours can certainly be a long time in football, during which time an errant catering truck in the USA would spark a chain of events that would eventually lead to an almost unbelievable friendly match being arranged between Havant and Waterlooville, of the Conference South, and Real Betis, of the Spanish La Liga. At Friday lunchtime, I was looking forward to my first ever visit to Fratton Park, to watch Portsmouth take on Real Betis for a 6.30 kick-off, whilst also considering a "double", by watching Gosport Borough against Havant and Waterlooville beforehand. However, with the Portsmouth players stranded in the USA after their flight home was cancelled due to a freak accident with a catering truck damaging their homebound plane, that friendly was cancelled on Friday afternoon. Almost immediately, it was announced that nearby Havant and Waterlooville would step into the breach and play host to Real Betis. Full credit to the club for having the initiative to move quickly and benefit from what would surely be a once in a lifetime opportunity for them, to welcome the first team of a top flight European team to their humble home.

Westleigh Park is located about a half hour walk northwards of Havant rail station, and the ground is a fairly typical modern non-league stadium. Very neat, smart and tidy, quite spacious, but lacking in any character or charm. There is one all-seater stand straddling the half way line, with floodlight pylons having the potential to obscure one's view, whilst around almost all of the rest of the ground is shallow covered terracing. Obviously considering how hastily this fixture was arranged, no programme was produced for this game.

Havant and Waterlooville are an established Conference South side these days, finishing in ninth place last season, but a whopping 14 points behind eighth place Eastleigh and 19 points shy of a play-off position. Matches against high calibre opposition are not completely unknown to Havant and Waterlooville, as in 2008, they beat Swansea City at home in the FA Cup and then leading twice at Anfield in the next round before eventually succumbing to Liverpool. As for Real Betis, they shall be returning to the top flight this coming season having won the Spanish Segunda Division last season after a two-season absence from La Liga. And they could not have asked for a much better opening fixture to look forward, at home to city rivals Sevilla.

To play on the same pitch as a La Liga team would be a wonderful occasion for the Havant and Waterlooville team, even if the game would surely be a complete mismatch, certainly if the Spaniards would take the game seriously. The emphatic answer to that was that they would, as they opened the scoring on just three minutes, and with just a quarter of an hour on the clock, they had raced into a four goal lead, and the only surprise was that by the time half time had arrived,

Real Betis had only scored five times, with Ruben Castro scoring a hat-trick and Jorge Molina a double (they scored 25 and 18 goals respectively in last season's Segunda Division). Their skill, movement on and off the ball, turn of pace and spotting passes and executing them perfectly were an absolute joy to watch and certainly far too good for a completely outclassed Havant and Waterlooville, whose best player was probably their goalkeeper Nathan Ashmore who made countless excellent saves to keep the score down. Credit though to Havant and Waterlooville for never letting their heads drop or resorting to cruder tactics to stop the opposition, and they did have a couple of reasonable chances to get on the scoresheet.

One imagined that the score-line could easily reach double figures if the game continued in the same vein after the interval, however it was a completely different game in the second half. Real Betis replaced nine of their players at half time, presumably giving their second-string a run out, and the game became much more even. Betis did score a sixth on 55 minutes through Sergio, but by now the mesmeric skill and almost magnetic attraction of the ball to Betis' players had disappeared. Havant clearly sensed they were much more in the game and they really should have gotten on the scoresheet after several flurries of corners and close-range shots were blocked. In the dying minutes, Real Betis were awarded a penalty following a clumsy tackle, which was converted confidently down the middle by Salva Sevilla for Betis' seventh goal of the game.

0-7 was how it finished, not that the result matters of course. Havant and Waterlooville will obviously never play this calibre of opposition in the league, and Monday night's rearranged friendly at Gosport Borough will be much more useful in terms of assessing where they are as they prepare for the new league season. One also imagines that, without the confidence that knowing playing against relatively very limited opponents brings, Real Betis will not look quite the world beaters they did today when they play the likes of Barcelona and Real Madrid in the league, but all in all, this was a thoroughly enjoyable evening's entertainment, and everyone present will take away very positive impressions of the Real Betis team, both of their professional yet down to earth players and officials and of their friendly fans. The only slightly disappointing aspect of the evening was the attendance, which was around 800, but perhaps this was due to the last-minute nature of the fixture.

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