

**TT No.67: Paul Roth** - Sun October 9th 2011; **Le Portel Stade** v Aulnoye; Nord Pas-de-Calais Seniors D'Honneur Division; Res: 0-1; Att: 250; Entry: 4 Euros; Altitude and global position: Stade Amour Sergent located on Boulevard Lyautey, Le Portel-Plage is 16m (52.493 ft) above sea level: latitude 50 degrees, 42.6 mins N; longitude 1 degree, 34.5 mins E (position derived from centre circle); Weather: Warm & for the most part sunny; Club shop: No; My day's carbon footprint: 13.7.

The for-October-only P&O offer of a day trip, 3 bottles of Gallo wine plus a gratis 7-piece breakfast for the paltry sum of just £19 was a bargain too good to spurn; my only dilemma being who could I find to accompany me across The Channel to avail myself of this gift horse, and more importantly to watch some football Francais? With the seismologist busy seismologising in the Hellenics, there was only ever going to be one candidate.

My insurmountable problem was that Sheherazard's Sundays are sacrosanct; those occasions are, when we're at home that is, formulaic...an 8 ack emma breakfast of porridge oats doused in warm milk and smothered in Demerara sugar; an in-depth read of the Sunday newspapers, followed by a stab at The Sunday Express GK Crossword; noon-time preprandial Amontillados; a traditional roasted luncheon, enhanced with all the trimmings followed shortly afterwards by a most necessary postprandial doze; afternoon tea that always includes brown bread sandwiches - crusts removed, and home-baked Victoria Sponge; a modicum of eventide television with the whole shebang rounded off by a fortifying nightcap...or three.

What inducements could I lay before my goddess to tempt her away from all this hard-earned hedonism, Frenchwards?

Cash; spondoolicks; hard currency, that's what! The hard bargaining commenced on Wednesday morning around midday. Two hours' later, an amicable settlement - to her at least - had been brokered.

The attractive resort of Le Portel-Plage lies just beyond and to the south of the much bigger settlement of Boulogne-sur-Mer, on France's Opal Coast. Its flower-filled thoroughfares, wide sandy and family-friendly beaches, coupled with the abundance of brasseries and hotels thereabouts, tell of an age when visits to the seaside were far more commonplace.

The most unusual thing to see on the golden sands nowadays are the collection of "flobarts" - small fishing boats - that are launched at low tide by ancient-looking tractors. In days gone by, it's said that the poorest families would live under these upturned vessels. The nearby campsite at Equihen-Plage has chalets designed to mimic those "Quilles en l'air" - "Keels in the air". Low water, as it was at the time of our visit, reveals Fort de l'Heurt, built by Napoleon to protect Boulogne, and endowed by the Germans in 1940 with a concrete machine-gun platform. When the tide is out the edifice resembles a beached cruise liner. It's an incongruous sight to say the least.

Stade Amour Sergent, the home of newly-promoted Le Portel Stade, is set on a spectacular promontory atop the cliffs and beach, a few metres out of the town centre, and is an absolute delight. Sweet-smelling flowers line its entrance, but it's the huge grandstand positioned on its westerly flank that catches the eye first-off; this vast structure is equipped with 12 rows of bum-numbing - I can vouch for that - bench seating. A much smaller, uncovered seating area is juxtaposed with a characterful, hatched buvet located in the arena's furthest corner. The substantive groundsman's dwelling is set above the cliff goal; the gentleman in question should be immensely proud of his work, as the grassed playing surface is amongst the finest your correspondent has ever seen. The entirety is, wherever possible, imaginatively decorated in the club's colours of yellow and blue. Despite how well-appointed this peach of a stadium is, it comes as a surprise that it does not possess floodlights.

I was unable to coax my beloved through Le Portel's portal (she went for a lengthy stroll along the prom instead), but if I had, entry for ladies comes free of charge in this competition. Presumably this is to attract families, and I have to say that amongst the assembled 250 there was indeed a large proportion of children and the gentler sex (the thought has crossed my mind that when the seismologist and I next attend a game in this league, perhaps we should don dresses and high-heels, and try to pass ourselves off as Cinderella's ugly sisters).

In the aforementioned clubhouse - don't step across the threshold if you're blue and yellow phobic - I was introduced to Le Portel's president, Michel Vigneron, who proudly showed me around. Trophies, along with a plethora of pennants, fill not only this clubhouse, but also the large office at the rear. Founded in 1924, the team's proudest moment came during their historic Coupe de France run of 1988/89. As the smallest surviving team in the competition, Le Portel were drawn away to then 1st Division side Lens. The nine-division gulf between the two combatants was almost breached by the minnows, who only lost 4-2 (having led 2-0) after prolongation (AET to you and me). A large photograph of the team that represented the club that day, which included Michel, hangs in a prominent position and describes the memorable event as "un Cendrillon" - a fairy-tale.

To celebrate my visit, I was presented with a club pennant and four copies of an "organigramme" issued for past Easter U 17s tournaments played at the ground. The 2010 edition of that 100-page tome will surely be the only vehicle where I'll ever read that Kent side Ashford Town FC have been paired to play Dynamo Minsk!

Unfortunately, I suppose I have to say something about the game itself. Actually, maybe that's a tad unfair, as the first-half wasn't that bad. The home side dominated the early proceedings without ever looking threatening. Then, on 20 minutes, they were correctly awarded a penalty by lady referee Christine Meurisse (a proficient official this, who held the players' full respect) for a trip on their centre-forward. He himself took the resultant kick, only for the visiting 'keeper to save it easily. From that moment Aulnoye grew in stature, carved out several decent scoring efforts themselves, and took the lead in the game's 40th minute. The latter 45 minutes was French football at its most gruesome.

You might think I'd be telling porkies if I told you that AS Aulnoye-Aymeries, from near Maubeuge on the Belgian border, never even managed to get the football into their hosts' penalty area. Sadly, It's no lie. That said, Le Portel Stade themselves never managed a single effort on their opponent's goal either. It was woeful fare, and goes down as one of the worst periods of play I have ever had the misfortune to witness. Aulnoye's entourage celebrated jubilantly at the tedium's conclusion, hot-footing it over to their two solitary fans who had bothered to travel the 200km to support their 'idles' (sic). Each royal blue-shirted player high-fived their hero-worshipping amies; it was a nice gesture. Even as I write, I'm still trying to fathom out how exactly these two teams - before kick-off that is - could have occupied the Seniors D'Honneur's top two berths.

For the stupendous Stade Amour Sergent alone, and pretty Le Portel-Plage itself, the trip was worth the effort and modest financial outlay. A cheap day out across La Manche, you all must be thinking. Think again! The cost to myself currently stands at a whole (note the word "whole") day's retail therapy at Bluewater this coming Thursday; a repast in a restaurant of my beloved's choosing and my undying promise to her that "I owe you one my love".

My only consolation is that she didn't watch the awful match. I'd be even more deeply indebted to her if she had!

FGIF Star Rating: 5\*.

07/20