

TT No.71: Paul Roth - Sun October 16th 2011; **Sporting Club Bailleulois** v Omni Sport Airois; Coupe de France Rd 5; Res: 0-1; Att: 400; Entry: 4 Euros; Altitude and global location: Complexe Sportif Lesage is 26m (85.301 ft) above sea level: latitude 50 degrees, 44.4 mins N; longitude 2 degrees, 43.6 mins E (position derived from centre circle); Weather: Warm and sunny; Club shop: No; My day's carbon footprint legacy: 13.7.

By midday P&O's alacritous Spirit of Britain superferry had disgorged its vehicles onto French soil. Twenty minutes later, due in no small part to the magnificence of the traffic-free Autoroute de Anglais peage, The Seismologist (who had returned from The Hellenics a few days earlier) and I were running the rule over Stade Delezoide, the home of Cercle Athletique Eperlecques. This particular venue was one of numerous choices that befell us on the day, where we could have watched a Coupe de France 5th Round match. Although fairly basic, the club's tie versus CFA2 side AS Marck possessed that magical "David and Goliath" cup ingredient - the home side play their football five divisions below their more illustrious visitors. I'll be honest; this was the game I'd set my heart on watching when the draw was made 10 days earlier. But we'd arrived in the village two-and-three-quarter hours too early! How on earth would we pass the time in the sleepy village?

The decision was mutual to head 50ks further south and east to the pretty Flanders town of Bailleul (pronounced by-erl), where the local Nord Pas-de-Calais Seniors PH side were taking on Seniors DH club Aire Sur-la-Lys in the same competition. This clash represented a difference of just two divisions - the latter being the more highly ranked outfit.

Bailleul (twinned with Hawick in Scotland and Yaka in Togo!), near the Belgian border, is a most attractive destination, whose ornate Belfry is clearly visible from miles around as one crosses the flat plains synonymous with this part of northern France. We parked in its main square, enjoyed a locally-brewed glass of Coq Hardi in the quaintly entitled Ville de Lille brasserie, before moving on to Stade Lesage.

This is where the Joie de Bailleul ends. Yes, the ground is equipped with a large grandstand, has an abundance of poplar trees surrounding it and is railed in entirety; but it's just too lower-league French for my liking; there's just nothing there that sets the pulse racing. Coupled with that, this was undoubtedly the least friendly welcome we have received on our travels en Francais. In fact, there was no welcome at all! To glean a look inside, I entered the tiny Buvet at the near end of the stand, but was duly and unceremoniously ushered out by a lady not dissimilar in appearance to the notorious Nazi, Aufseherin Irma Grese.

At least the large contingent of travelling flag-waving and horn-blowing supporters helped to create a cup-tie atmosphere. But we were only going to be 'treated' to one 'But' again. That became patently obvious as the action got underway. At least this time there was effort and commitment from both sides; unfortunately,

much of it was misguided. The players' intentions were in the main correct; the execution so often wasn't. Bailleul did however carve out one golden opportunity to take the lead during the first-half, but the shot flashed across the goal mouth and wide of the upright. Aire were always the more threatening, without ever creating a decent opening.

The second period started with a 20-minute period of sustained pressure from the visitors. During this time, they managed a rasping shot themselves, unbelievably cleared off the goal line by one of their own team! Eventually the hosts' defence capitulated after some clever play on the left flank by Aire's No. 11. His dinked cross was gleefully headed home, and that was that. The men in green did have one last-ditch chance to take the match into 'Prolongation', but mercifully the through-on-goal forward never even made contact with the ball, following an inch-perfect pass.

Having arrived back in Garlinge soon after 8pm, the first thing I did was look for Eperlecques' result. They lost 1-3; it was, annoyingly by all accounts, one of the most exciting football matches ever witnessed at their diminutive stadium.

It's called Sod's law!

FGIF Star Rating: 5*.

07/20