

TT No.92: Mark Rose - Sat 12th November 2011; **Birmingham City U18s 2 v Tottenham Hotspur U18s 1** (Premier Academy League) and **England 1 Spain 0** (Friendly International at Wembley Stadium); Ticket Price: £35 (free for the youth game); Travel : £50 + Oyster fares (a lot more than it should have been!); Beer and food: £35-40.

For someone that prides himself on organisation of such things I had not organised this particular trip well. I only realised the night before that I was travelling from Marylebone rather than Euston which meant I had to leave earlier on Saturday morning. As I had not checked TFL engineering works I left at 0630 to leave plenty of time. A brisk 15-minute walk to Archway station was followed by a Tube journey involving the Northern, Victoria and Bakerloo lines due to the aforementioned engineering works. Nonetheless I arrived at Marylebone early at 0730 which afforded me the opportunity to walk around the streets of the capital - at least in the immediate vicinity of the station. A lovely seafood restaurant (to which I may return), a five star "Landmark" hotel and what looked like the headquarters of the French bank BNP Paribas were spotted before I went back to Marylebone for the 0800 train.

A smooth journey to Birmingham Moor Street on the Chiltern line ensued on which I read Friday's edition of, Sport, the excellent magazine given out free at stations. It arrived on time at 1000 and a few minutes later one of the Three Musketeers (henceforth known as the 3 M's) turned up, as planned, having walked from New Street station following a journey from London on the Virgin line. Metaller (as he will henceforth be known) suggested we partake in an alcoholic beverage in a nearby establishment as we had ample time. A few minutes later we were supping an excellent pint of Pudding Porter, a rich dark fruity ale which was 4.5% abv. We took our time and then at 1100 decided to get a taxi.

A taxi on a football excursion is usually furthest from my mind but we wanted to get one to Birmingham City's training ground in order that we could pre-book it back after the game to catch our 1415 train. During the journey I realised two things - I had misjudged completely how far outside town the complex was and therefore we would not be able catch the 1415 on which we were booked. Secondly, I realised that the taxi driver didn't have a clue where he was going and we only found the way thanks to Metaller's Birmingham A-Z. Therefore, we decided not to book the taxi back and instead paid the driver £10 each - money that in hindsight could have been saved.

Nevertheless, we arrived in good time at 1130 to the West Hill Training Centre which, for me, was a new ground. It was situated handily off a main road with a "parent's room" (toilet and TV inside) to the left and the changing rooms for the players just next to that. The pitches were beyond the changing rooms but the officious staff made us walk all the way the back instead of cutting through beyond them. Indeed, they wouldn't even open the gates to the pitches until 1145 by

which time the other two members of the 3 M's had arrived. There was paths patronising laid out on which to walk to the pitches which made the 3 M's and I deliberately avoid them and walk across other pitches to get to the side of the one we wanted, in order to watch the Under-18 encounter between Birmingham City and Spurs. The match kicked off two minutes late at 1202 following a minute's silence (for the war dead) and, nine seconds later, Birmingham were ahead. The ball was pumped forward and Miles, the Spurs goalkeeper, came miles out of his goal to clear the ball. He missed it as did the Spurs defender and Birmingham tapped it into an empty net.

Spurs recovered from this early mishap and started to control possession as the pattern of the first half was set. Birmingham defended resolutely and strongly, pressing every Spurs player and not allowing them time or space on the ball. Coupled with numerous fouls Spurs became frustrated and only created one decent goalscoring flurry before the break - which forced Birmingham's keeper to make a double save and their defender to clear the third shot off the line (well, the middle shot of the three). Birmingham did not look to come forward at all.

At the half time interval, I ate what the mother of one of the Spurs players referred to as a picnic; two cheddar cheese sandwiches on brown bread, salt 'n' vinegar McCoys and a bottle of Evian water. Very good it was too I may add.

The game opened up a little in the second half with Birmingham becoming slightly more adventurous. Nonetheless Spurs still dominated and when McEvoy ran through the only surprise was that he couldn't finish the chance himself and instead had to be brought down by the goalkeeper. Hawkins duly dispatched the resulting penalty. Spurs then pressed forward for what would have been a deserved winner but were instead undone by another mistake at the back. Dombaxe dithered on the ball and it fell to a Brum forward who coolly slotted home. With a few minutes to go the three M's and I started walking around the pitch towards the exit. "There's still a few minutes to go!" shouted Mr Lo, the Spurs youth team regular. I don't think he realised that not only do the three M's and I never leave a game early but we also time each game and we knew exactly how long was left. We walked around the pitch crab like (or linesman like) as we continued to watch the game and, with about three minutes left, were standing by one of the corner flags nearest the exit. Birmingham held on for an undeserved 2-1 victory and, immediately at the final whistle, we turned and headed for the exit. The early walk was to prove crucial.

It was now 1350. The other two M's made their own way to their afternoon pub excursions whilst Metaller and I made our way to the nearby bus stop, arriving at 1400. The 45 bus came a couple of minutes later which was also to prove crucial. Knowing that we couldn't make the 1415 train we were now aiming for the next train, the 1455, and indeed the only train we could possibly get. The bus was caught in a bit of traffic and it arrived at New Street station at 1443. A brisk walk to Moor Street station enabled Metaller to buy some food whilst we both had to pay an additional £20 for getting the alternative train. If we hadn't gone to the exit at Birmingham early and hadn't caught that bus, we wouldn't have made it.

The 1455 Chiltern service was surprisingly quiet but thankfully the journey was smooth. Metaller ate his sandwich and chilli crisps whilst listening to men screaming on his I-pad (which apparently constituted music). I, with my 1980's Walkman, listened to Absolute Radio which combined Britpop music with a regular update of the FA Cup 1st round scores.

After passing through numerous leafy suburban areas such as Banbury, Leamington Spa and High Wycombe it arrived, as scheduled, at Wembley Stadium station at 1642. I hadn't been to that particular station before and therefore didn't quite realise how close it was to the ground. We were outside our entrance at 1647, twenty-eight minutes before kick-off. The ground itself wasn't new to me though, this being my thirty first visit with Spurs and England since the new version of the stadium was opened. However, we couldn't yet go in our as the third person sitting with us, who I shall refer to as Posh Gooner or PG for short, had the tickets and hadn't yet arrived. He came a bit later than planned at 1705. A couple of minutes queueing ensued followed by numerous escalators to the top and then the obligatory pit-stop. We walked into the seating area just in time for the minute's silence (again for the war dead) and took our seats just as the players were ready to kick-off.

What followed was a decidedly dull game. In the first half England, despite some unusually good individual performances, decided to hoof the ball forward or in the channels and constantly gave it away. No thought of keeping possession or making runs forward. Spain were lacklustre, perhaps more concerned with avoiding injuries. Instead the entertaining part of the first half were the two gentlemen sitting behind us. Home England games have attracted a new breed of "fan", one which I don't particularly like. These two arrived late, went down for half-time early, came back up for the second half late and left ten minutes before the end. However, it was their comments that were to provide amusement.

They thought Capello was Spanish. They couldn't believe they had paid £35 to watch a boring game (this was after they had been in their seats for ten minutes). They likened Wembley to the O2 arena. They couldn't believe they weren't allowed to take lager into their seats. The funniest comment was reserved for when the rowdier of the two gentlemen (who at one point tried to start his own chant but ended up gurgling instead) phoned his friend to tell him he was at the ground. "Are you watching the game on TV?" he cried. "Can you see where the referee is at the moment? Well I'm miles away from him!" You couldn't make it up.

Half-time was passed by playing a driving game on my phone. The second half was slightly better. Early on England scored; a header from Bent rebounding off the pitch to leave Lampard with an easier head in from a yard out. I thought this would galvanise Spain but they only started to play in the last fifteen minutes. In this period, they hit the woodwork and then missed a gaping chance in the last minute to earn what would have been a deserved draw. England continued to be hit and miss and, whilst the final whistle earned a 1-0 win over the reigning European and World Champions the performance did not bode well for future matches and tournaments to come.

After the game the three of us met up with two others who had been sitting elsewhere in the ground and we wandered around Wembley looking for an Indian restaurant. We eventually found one called Bombay Dreams. It was probably the strangest Indian I have ever been to. You could only have a set menu. You had to tell the staff when you were ready for each course. You had to tell them whether you wanted to pay after each course or once at the end. The waitress kept coming up every two minutes to try and sell us things which weren't included in the set price. In the mean-time there was Bollywood singing and dancing taking place. The food wasn't too bad (cheese, lamb, chicken, rice, salad, etc. and then an interesting desert which was a lettuce leaf wrapped around some sweet aniseed tasting meat) and was wholesome (although at one point I ate a green chilli which made my eyes water) but it's probably not a restaurant I'll go to again.

We then made our way to the JJ Moons Wetherspoons and I had a pint of a light refreshing although dull ale whose name escapes me. We then split up and PG and I went towards home using the Bakerloo line, London Overground and Northern Line. We stopped off at Kentish Town for one more pint at The Oxford. I think the beer was called Tribute Ale but it was a dark wholesome pint with a rich aftertaste and served in an old-fashioned ale glass with a handle. I then got the Northern Line back to Archway (PG continued on the same train towards his humble abode) and was indoors, following a brisk 15-minute walk, at some point gone midnight.

The next such possible opportunity to see both a Spurs and England game on the same day will not be until at least September 2012. I look forward to similar adventures then.

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