

TT No.57: Mike Latham - Sat 10 November 2012; **Auchinleck Talbot** v Kirkintilloch Rob Roy; West Juniors Super League; Result: 3-3; Attendance: 500 (est.); Admission: £5; Programme: £1; Raffle ticket: £1; FGIF Match Rating: 5*.

For the second Saturday running I headed northwards with the view of watching one of the top teams in the junior ranks. Last week I had the pleasure of visiting Linlithgow, giants of the East Section; today's intended destination was Auchinleck, giants of the West.

Auchinleck is an old mining village in East Ayrshire, two miles north of Cumnock- a team with whom they share a renowned rivalry. The A road from the motorway is one of the worst I've travelled upon, narrow, winding and poorly maintained. The compensation for the football fan is that it passes through villages steeped in the game, Muirkirk and Lugar being two of the junior sides I've visited in recent years, Glenbuck (of Cherrypickers fame) and Cronberry (Eglinton) sadly being now defunct. The moving memorial to Bill Shankly is just off the A road into Glenbuck, and is well worth the short detour. I called here after visiting Muirkirk a year or so ago.

There's no doubt that the game of football runs deep in this part of the world, a view that deepens when the village of Auchinleck is reached. It's a grey, chilly afternoon and rain is falling from slate grey skies. It's an unpromising November afternoon but the locals are all scurrying, collars turned, shoulders hunched against the elements towards Beechwood Park, situated close to the main crossroads. To add to the sense of occasion the Muirkirk and District Pipe Band are in attendance, their musical strains echoing through the rain.

Football dates back over one hundred years here; Auchinleck Talbot was formed in 1909 and are named after Lord Talbot de Maldahide, the man who gifted the club their Beechwood Park ground. They have a proud record in junior football; nine Junior Cup wins, eleven championships; they are a serious football team.

Beechwood Park, I thought was simply fantastic, an antidote to the sanitised plethora of new stadium re-builds that blight the football landscape. Terraced on all four sides, with a modern main stand on one side, opened in 2005 and a cover and social club behind the nearside goal the ground must rank among the best-appointed in the Juniors. The most striking feature is the pitch, or the park as they term it in these parts. Lovingly maintained, immaculately maintained, it resembles a billiard table; if you can't play football on this then it's time to give up.

There's a warm welcome from the club official at the entrance and the purveyor of raffle tickets and an added bonus is that Talbot produce a programme, a simply magnificent effort for the princely sum of £1.

The Main stand with its cover, tiered seating and standing room behind the seats must seem an attractive shelter on a day like this when the rain comes down in

violent bursts, punctuated with spells of bright sunshine. So, too the covered terrace behind the goal. But the majority of the spectators choose to brave the elements on the open terraces, many armed with umbrellas.

One of the most appealing features of the Juniors is the lack of pomposity and show. The team line-ups are announced quickly, surnames only, the teams enter the ground promptly and the game kicks-off on time at 2pm. There is no inane chanting from the spectators, no silly songs, just the last drains of the pipe band drifting away in the wind.

Within seconds we are into an intense game of football; Rob Roy look an older side but well organised whereas Talbot immediately settle into a high tempo, quick-passing game as favoured by Linlithgow last week. Proof that standards are high here are apparent immediately- a Talbot midfield player fails to control the ball instantly under pressure and there's a collective sigh of disapproval from the spectators. A sigh here counts for a thousand words elsewhere.

The game is a cracker, and the action flows quickly from end to end. Rob Roy score first, a superb, curling shot from distance but Talbot go in 2-1 to the good at half-time thanks to a penalty and a scrambled finish after concerted pressure. At this stage Talbot look the likely winners; they are beginning to dominate possession and have a host of clever, inventive players, happy in possession.

Half-time passes quickly; the Pipe Band reappears even though they're not allowed to tread the hallowed turf. One of the visiting subs engages in an extended kick about on the pitch with two local youths that ends in smiles and high fives all round. Meanwhile the pie hut is doing good business, no wonder as it's a slickly organised operation with a range of appetising fare- the onion pies and homemade vegetable soup must rank amongst the finest in the land.

The second half starts in sensational fashion, a Talbot player sent-off for denying a goal-scoring opportunity, the visitors drawing level from the spot. Soon later they are ahead, a slick passing move converted from close range. Talbot never give up, their pressure is relentless and with time to spare they get a lifeline. A visiting player is instantly red-carded for feet-up in a 50-50 tackle; seconds later another gets a second yellow for a foul in the area. Talbot convert the penalty but in the dying embers just fail to make the most of their sudden one-man advantage.

After a frenetic, intense, high-tempo game in the rain the end tally is six goals, three penalties, three red cards. And it's all over before four o'clock. Within seconds of the final whistle most of the crowd have melted away in the growing gloom, the road back to the motorway is eerily quiet and James Alexander Gordon hasn't started to lubricate his tonsils before the landmark of J15 and Moffat is passed and passport control south of Gretna is soon safely negotiated.

I've been to many games in the Juniors, many simply outstanding occasions. This was the best of the lot. Take it from me, a visit to Beechwood Park is as good as it gets, simply outstanding for so many reasons. Proper football.

