

TT No.74: Mike Latham - Sat 22 December 2012; **Spartans** v Stirling University; East of Scotland League Prem Division; Result: 1-2; Attendance: 200 (est.); Admission: £5; Programme: £1.50; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

With rain bucketing down and flood warnings everywhere I decided to head for a ground I'd saved for a rainy day- that day, I decided, had come. So, to Ainslie Park, home of Spartans Football Club with their excellent facilities and, importantly on a day like this, their artificial pitch (I'm not sure if it's 3g or 4g but either way it plays superbly).

Resisting the temptation to head off the Edinburgh by-pass at Riccarton- good job, too, as the Heriot-Watt University v Gretna 2008 game was called off at 2pm on a referee's inspection having passed an earlier look, I reached City Road in good time, headed down Pilton Drive by the Morrisons supermarket and soon parked up at the Ainslie Park sports complex.

I'd seen Spartans several times before at their old ground just along from Morrisons and now awaiting redevelopment. A former Football League ground, I remember the vast grassed bank and the great excitement as Spartans prevailed over Queen's Park in the Scottish Cup in the 2005-06 season to reach the last sixteen. I went to the next round, too as Spartans made a highly creditable home draw against St Mirren before over 3,000 supporters; though they lost the replay 3-0 it was a wonderful effort.

Spartans originated in 1951 when players from the Edinburgh University side elected to stay together as a team after graduating. Since the 1970s they've become one of the most successful sides in the East of Scotland League. They also field a side in the East Junior set-up, two open age amateur sides and several women's teams including one which plays in the Scottish Women's Premier League. Spartans also run a successful academy set-up and their facilities must be used by many people in the community over the course of a week- what a fantastic facility it is for the locals in the north-west of Edinburgh.

Spartans have ambitions of entering the Football League and lost out to Annan Athletic after Gretna relinquished their league status in 2008. Those ambitions have risen since the development of Ainslie Park. Spartans moved there in November 2008, just a few hundred yards from City Park. It's a highly impressive facility including a 504-seater stand, an excellent club house with balcony in the corner by the entrance, a state-of-the-art pitch and superb floodlights that easily pierced the winter gloom. Two sides of the ground offer a slightly elevated view from neatly maintained grass banking.

Alongside the main pitch is another full-sized artificial pitch on which Leith Athletic were playing Hawick Royal Albert in a first division game switched here at late notice. This game, which kicked-off half-an-hour earlier than the Spartans

game finished 4-1 in Leith's favour. I was actually able to watch half the game in total, so the afternoon fairly whizzed by.

I'd seen Stirling University before and knew they were an excellent footballing side. As reigning champions of the league, they faced a stiff test against a Spartans side sitting proudly unbeaten at the top of the table. 'One of defining matches of the season,' was how Spartans manager Douglas Samuel described the game in the glossy 24-page programme that was further proof of Spartans' organisational skills. With a tannoy in operation announcing line-ups, substitutions and goal-scorers it was like being at a Football League game. The tea bar was also well-equipped and all the club officials I met were friendly and welcoming.

The driving rain mercifully abated during a fast-flowing first-half that contained some fine passing football from both sides. The visitors took the lead midway through the half, Spartans levelling soon later. As the rain came back, driving all but the most-hardy under the cover of the stand the second half was an altogether more-cagey affair with few chances.

Just when it looked as though the league's top sides would settle for a draw the University side gained a fortuitous winner in the second minute of added-on time. An angled left-wing cross was deflected past his own goalkeeper by an anguished home defender. Stirling's joy was there for all to see- as a result of this win, they moved up to second in the league, five points behind Spartans with three games in hand on the leaders who had suffered their first league defeat of the campaign.

The journey home wasn't the best- more driving rain, surface water and spray, but the roads were very quiet. Another top afternoon in Scotland and just about the ultimate example of a community club, I was very impressed by Spartans.

04/20