

**TT No.33: *Chris Freer*** - Friday October 25th 2013; **Ross County** v Inverness Caledonian Thistle; Scottish Premiership; Score: 0-0 (abandoned at half time); Crowd: not known; Entertainment value: 2/5.

As many of you will have gathered from my previous ramblings, I have the privilege of plying my trade in and around the beer industry and as a good pint has always been dear to my heart, I feel I may have found my vocation. After attempting to make money in my younger days by trying to flog the stuff to pubs and their customers (without a great deal of profitable success, I should point out) I now write about beer and publish material for breweries, and this seems to be keeping a roof over the family's head. Oh, and I still get to drink some of it too, usually in the name of research.

So, when I'm invited to join a Society of Independent Brewers (SIBA) beer judging panel in the Lake District on a Thursday, my natural inclination is to accept, and then have a quick look at the fixtures to see if it's worthwhile making a few days of it. As luck would have it, Berwick Rangers are playing at Peterhead on the Saturday and the night before, Ross County are hosting local rivals Inverness Cally in a TV match. So, two of my last remaining Scottish grounds on a plate. All I have to do is drive up there. Well, I'm in Cumbria - I'm already halfway up!

Just a word about beer. Most punters will know that CAMRA was born out of frustration at the domination of keg beer, but after years of success is now having a real problem deciding how to deal with the spread of 'craft', essentially a 'new wave' of keg beer. Many of the new breed of microbrewers, also with one eye on what's happening in the States, have embraced the fact that a substantial percentage of UK retail outlets still can't cope with cask ale, and want a brewery conditioned alternative that takes the hassle out of cellaring and dispense. So, an increasing amount of their output is going down that route, as well as into bottle, where much of it is not bottle conditioned.

In the meantime, SIBA, the small brewers' organisation, is also having an issue with 'craft' but for different reasons. They're worried that the big brewers will hijack the term and convince unsuspecting punters that all beer is 'craft'. Surely not, they wouldn't do a thing like that....!

My 6-hour, rain-soaked drive up to North-East Scotland on Friday morning from my base in Kendal necessitates that I first check in at my hotel in Aberdeen, before the cheap hotel company that I often use gives my room away. I have it on good authority that double-booking is standard practise, to ensure profits are maintained. Once safely installed in my room I make a telephone call to Ross County to ensure the game is on and I can buy a ticket at the ground. Both questions receive an affirmative. So it's back in the car and another 3-hour slog to Dingwall, the rain unrelenting. It's only when I reach Inverness that I realise I don't quite know where Dingwall is. Fortunately, a minibus with prominent Inverness

Caledonian Thistle markings takes up station in front of me and, as they are County's opponents tonight, I reason that this vehicle is the one to follow!

Parking at Ross County is easy and free. Right outside the ground and plenty of space, even for a local derby like tonight's. I purchase a ticket from a portakabin nearby, and head round to the East Stand, the newest part of the stadium. The wait outside for the gates to open is stressful, particular as a fellow punter muses that the last time the gates were this late opening, the match was called off! A senior steward turns up and bangs on the door, and we are in. The snack bar inside the ground serves the legendary Macaroni Pie, which I eagerly devour before making my way to my seat. There's a problem, as I'm right next to a security barrier which restricts my view of the far goal unless I lean well forward in my seat. That's OK, until the guy in front decides to lean well back! A young female steward sees my predicament and promises to re-locate me once the match starts, which she does.

The game itself is typically Scottish. Some individual skill but played at much too high a level of intensity, the ball pinging around like a pinball and tackles flying in. Well it is a local derby I suppose. At half time the floodlights go out, which we presume is a cost-saving exercise. Two attempts to restart them fail miserably, we are staring an abandonment in the face, and I head off back to Aberdeen.

04/20