

TT No.43: Mike Latham - Sat 13 December 2014: South of Scotland League C/F at New King Edward Park, Lockerbie; **Edusport Academy** 3-1 St Cuthbert Wanderers; Attendance: 250 (h/c), Admission: £4; Programme: 30p; FGIF Match Rating: 4*.

A surreal and uplifting experience on a freezing afternoon in Lockerbie was well worth the long journey from a morning commitment in Huddersfield.

First of all, the South of Scotland League has had a real boost this season. Its numbers have been boosted by the sad demise of the long-standing Dumfries & District Football League and the inclusion of Edusport Academy, which is best described from their website <http://www.edusportacademy.com/en/home.html> .

“The Edusport Academy is a residential football academy based in Scotland, for young French footballers. Created in 2011, the Edusport Academy is located near Scotland’s largest city, Glasgow and recently opened a second Academy situated in Edinburgh. The 34 weeks program offers talented footballers from France the opportunity to combine high-level football development with English language tuition whilst giving players valuable visibility and exposure to professional football clubs in Scotland and in England.

“Training daily in the best football facilities in Scotland, our players benefit from the coaching experience of top UEFA qualified coaching staff, allowing them to improve technically, tactically and physically during their time at the Academy. Regular matches organized against professional clubs in Scotland allow our players to be tested and impress at the highest level.

“As well as continuing their football education, players attend 15 hours per week of English Language (ESOL) tuition, ensuring that each player is guaranteed something positive for their future.”

So here we are in Lockerbie at New King Edward Park, situated at right angles to the old ground of Mid Annandale FC north-east of the town, just off J17 of the M74. Recently opened, it’s a 3G pitch with cage surround. There are plans to develop a covered stand and move the dressing rooms but even as it is, it’s a simply fantastic community facility and all credit to Dumfries & Galloway Council for providing the funding.

Football in Lockerbie dates back to the 1870s but the future of the ‘Mids’ was threatened by their existing pitch which was prone to flooding. They combated this by ground-sharing on the 3G pitch at Annan Athletic but now have an enviable new home. Already they have been able to stage home games under lights on a Friday evening and the attendances have been heart-warming.

So, to a freezing cold Saturday afternoon and the chance to watch a cup final between Edusport and St Cuthbert Wanderers, from Kirkcudbright. Not surprisingly, the latter have the majority of the support from the 250-strong crowd and a mobile catering van does brisk business. There’s an A4 folded programme on

sale for 30p- a model of its type- and PA announcements as the spectators gather on either side of the railed-off artificial surface.

St Cuthbert also have a 3G pitch and the technical ability of both sets of players is impressive. I love the South of Scotland League anyway- and it has developed its profile this season with the introduction of a really excellent website- and this was a fine example of how to stage a prestige match.

The first half was fast flowing and competitive, played before an appreciative crowd. I spotted a few people once associated with Gretna's meteoric rise through the ranks amongst the crowd. Edusport look impressive- the way they set-up, the way they play- the only thing lacking was a finishing touch.

Within seconds of the restart St Cuthbert Wanderers took the lead with a great finish from a flowing move. Finally, Edusport, their players all attired in black, equalised and quickly asserted their authority with two more goals. Their joy at scoring was something to behold- meriting several yellow cards for over-exuberance. Their joy at the presentation was great to see.

What a great occasion, a great game and a fantastic facility for Lockerbie. It was truly an inspirational afternoon of grassroots football that warmed the heart and was well worth the long journey along frozen roads.

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