

TT No.97: Keith Aslan - Saturday 2nd February 2019; **SOUTHEND ACADEMY** v Exeter City Academy; EFL Youth Alliance Cup Southern Section Final; Kick-Off: 11.02; Result: 1-2; Admission: Free; Programme: £1; Attendance: 138 (129 home, 6 away & 3 neutral).

Something a bit different here, but having watched a number of youth cup games I knew U 18 football is often as entertaining, if not more so, than the grown-up version and today's match did not disappoint. Possibly the 16-page programme played a part in swaying my decision. Day started off on a bit of a downer with my train cancelled (dodgy engine) so a lengthy, but scenic detour round the Kent coast was called for. The boys play at the Southend training ground, 'Boots and Laces', a 20-minute walk from Prittlewell, which is a key station in Network Rail's weekend line closure project meaning I had a tedious 40-minute slog from Southend Central. Worse was to come when I found two of the three Greggs in the High Street have shut down, with the one remaining being the only one I've done. Life can be so cruel.

Boots and Laces has three pitches, an admin. block and most importantly 'Carmel's Kitchen' which served drinks and hot food throughout the morning, but Carmel could have done with a bit of assistance to cope with the half-time rush. The middle pitch is where Youth games are played and standing is only allowed behind the goals. I can see why you can't stand along the same side as the players benches but I couldn't understand why supporters on the opposite touchline were driven back to the ends. The reason, I later found out, was at an earlier game this season a spectator standing along the side was injured by a ball so they made it out of bounds on Health and Safety grounds. Presumably you can't get hit by a ball if you're standing behind the goal!

The one-off programme was 16 pages of undiluted pleasure, perfectly laid out, no adverts and plenty of reading material with a colour photograph on the front of Freddy Eastwood Junior, a dead ringer for his dad but hopefully with more mainstream accommodation arrangements! The accompanying game held the interest with Exeter's winner coming deep into the second half. With no injuries or stoppages of any kind as far as I could see, the referee added on five minutes just because he could. The 'injury time' gave Exeter the opportunity to fill it up with a couple of substitutions and here the players showed their naivete. When their number was shown they trotted off the field. O.k. Usain Bolt hasn't got anything to worry about but I'm sure the coach will be telling the players when you're 2-1 up in stoppage time and substituted you don't trot off the pitch, you walk in a zig zag incredibly slowly. Why do these youngsters think the substitutions were made?

With most of the crowd going on to Southend United's match (same result) a fellow hopper invited me to join him at a nearby Southend Combination game. I'd rather spend the afternoon watching a box set of Mrs. Brown's Boys, life is just too short. So, a rare Saturday evening for me luxuriating in my Broadstairs dacha. I soon got

over the trauma of cancelled trains and closed Greggs to reflect on another Saturday well spent.

04/20