

Outside the Bay

***An offbeat look at the world of North East football inside & outside of Hillheads. . .
with our European correspondent Paul Benneworth***



One of the great pleasures of attending a match at Hillheads in the last couple of seasons has been the opportunity to get a drink in a plastic glass. I certainly don't take a beer at every game, because there's a long stretch of the year where a Bovril is necessary for insulation from the weather conditions. But when there's some sun and the wind

drops, it seems so civilised to be able to savour a pint, rather than trying to rush it in 15 minutes at half time.

It's quite a novelty, and I remember the first time I had a beer on the Whitley Bay terraces. It was the 2010 FA Vase semi-finals, and 4,000 fans had squeezed themselves into Hillheads for what would be the final step towards the fourth Wembley victory. I was standing that day beyond the West Stand, next to a refreshments stall selling beer, so I grabbed a pint and then turned round to be confronted by a policeman

I knew that the law since the 1980s forbade the consumption of alcohol in sight of a game of Association Football. He quickly and friendly reassured me that neither was Hillheads a designated ground, nor were the afternoon's volunteering police interested in draconian enforcement. But it remained a relative novelty until the start of last season.

The world of soccer has a funny relationship with alcohol. Heineken has been sponsoring the UEFA Champions League for 24 years now, but article 36 of its stadium and security regulations had long banned the sale of alcohol at any UEFA-sanctioned games. That's something all too familiar to those of us who rushed to the bar at half time at St James during an Intertoto game only to see locked fridges and switched-off pumps. That regulation has now been relaxed so clubs can serve the thirsty fan a pint during a Europa league game "in line with their domestic regulations".

Those regulations vary greatly between countries. With the average price of beer in Norway at more than £12 a pint in line with a very strict government attitude to alcohol consumption, beer is completely banned at football grounds. There are a few hardcore fans bars around the ground, and the fanatics do take advantage of the midnight sun of the summer season and the evening kickoffs to practice the Norwegian custom of "vorspiel" and cushioning the disappointment with a pre-match tipple.

The Netherlands has the relaxed regulations you might expect, with the main regulations in grounds relating to glassware near the pitch. But even in the lower levels of the pyramid, it's not uncommon for the bars to sell bottles, and it was common watching our village side in Lonneker to take a Grolsch floptop to stand next to the fence.

Where Dutch authorities are strict however is in dealing with away fans in professional matches. Football violence really got out of hand in the 1990s, and in response, a rule was introduced which compelled away fans to travel to grounds on chartered and heavily policed transport that brings the fans inside segregated areas. Drinking is banned on those buses, and sometimes also banned in the away areas – only one stadium belonging De Graafschap has a complete alcohol ban.

Germany may have been knocked off its position as the number one beer drinking nation a quarter century ago, but pilsner and the Reinheitsgebot (beer purity law) remain woven into football. Indeed, if you travel to watch a Schalke 04 game in our sister city of Gelsenkirchen, then you can enjoy a perfect pint of Veltns in the eponymous stadium. Courtesy of a 3 mile pipeline to four giant underground cooled beer vats, for less than four pounds a premium pilsner can be yours to enjoy whilst watching a team playing in a very familiar strip.

Although Spain is more renowned for its wine culture, the craft beer revolution has seen beer become ever more publicly prominent in the last decade. So I had high hopes of enjoying a delicious Estrella when I went to watch Levante take on the galacticos of Real Madrid last year. Despite a number of enormous beer stands, they only sell the alcohol free version there, and I had to take solace with a hard-fought 2-2 draw that guaranteed the home team top flight football for another season.

There is a good reason for these restrictions of course, and that is because intoxication can lead to antisocial behaviour and worse: a pitchside pint is a privilege to be earned. So in taking a drink at Hillheads, we have to remember our responsibilities and ensure that we don't give anyone an excuse to ban this much loved pleasure. And then we can toast the success of our team this season, something we can all drink to: proost, skál, salud and cheers!

Paul