

U18 Centenary Shield - England 1-1 Northern Ireland

Monday 11 March 2013

Played at Home Park, Plymouth Argyle FC on the 8th March 2013

Whilst last week's game against Wales was just about over in the first seven minutes, this one began at a much more sedate pace and while both teams fenced away for the first 10 minutes there was little to waste pencil lead on. For England, Kieran Morris came in at centre back after injury and skippered the side, and his influence certainly gave a bit more steel to the England line up. Northern Ireland were fresh and confident after a 2-1 victory over Scotland, but they found their determination in the tackle easily matched by England on this occasion.

After 9 minutes a long ball from Nick Haughton exposed the Irish centre backs as Rhys Turner's electric pace outstripped them and he should have scored but credit should be given to the outstretched left hand of Irish 'keeper Jordan Williamson. A mazy run by Turner after 11 minutes, and a neat interchange of passes with Michael Smith, gave Smith a shooting chance, then another, after his first was blocked, and despite calls for handball the Irish scrambled the ball away.

England were playing much longer and stronger this week, and pressing further up the field, looking more dangerous and retaining a better shape. But more often than not Rhys Turner was the Lone Ranger up front and England's long balls out from the back left him without support (where was Tonto when he was needed?), and Irish centre back Jordan Dane soon had him worked out. Conor McCormack, playing at right back this week, stretched his long legs down the right wing after 13 minutes and hit a delightful cross which was headed back across the box, Smith took one touch but volleyed just wide of the post.

England were quicker and more confident than the Irish during most of the half but kept failing to capitalise on chances made. Haughton missed a good opportunity after 21 minutes, and then after Ryan Fergany was floored near the top right of the box in the 24th minute, his blistering cross was headed back across goal by Morris but Haughton took two touches when one would have done and another chance went begging.

Whilst most of the pressure was coming from England, the Irish infrequent raids were positive and dangerous. One such after 35 minutes won them a corner on the right. It was hit long to the back of the goal, nodded across goal to Steven McCullough whose shot looked every bit goal bound until Michael Pearce launched himself to the right and finger-tipped over to keep England in the game.

Probably England's best chance of the half came after 39 minutes when Fergany struck a trademark hard flat corner from the right. It was met full on by Turner at the back post but his header hit the Irish defender, Glendinning, on the back and rebounded for another corner. It ought to have given England a deserved 1-0 lead. Half time 0-0.

The first part of the second half was a dreary affair with little or no action. Jack Odam replaced Michael Smith to add an extra attacker after 62 minutes, and then a minute later after a reckless challenge Gani Nuredini joined Kieran Morris in the referee's notebook. England lost rhythm and control of the game now and were less effective going forward, Ireland pressing much more positively. They were unlucky not to go ahead when a fierce left foot shot from winger McCullough rattled the post with Pearce this time well beaten, but England, looking shaky, were able to scramble it clear.

The inevitable happened after 67 minutes when an Irish corner on the right was flicked across goal from the near post by an Irish head, and with the English defence chasing shadows the ball landed at the back post where Jonathan McMurray smashed the ball home to give Northern Ireland a 1-0 lead.

Morris, showing great leadership and energy, burst out from the back in the 69th minute, past 3 players before sending Fergany clear down the right wing – another delightful cross from him was met in the box by Odam but he fired over when really he should have scored. Odam shovelled another opportunity over the bar after 73 minutes, and Haughton had an ambitious but fruitless effort from 30 yards just a minute later. Too many long straight balls were making it easy for the Irish defence. Then after 84 minutes fabulous one touch interplay down the left by Shaquille Hippolyte-Patrick and Haughton saw Haughton's neat pull back being smashed against a defender by Turner when it should have hit the back of the net.

England were doing everything they could now to equalise and were a little exposed at the back, but Pearce was always up to the job when the Irish broke forward. Reward came for England after 88 minutes when Haughton again set off on a mazy dribble, leaving 5 players in his wake the goal opened up for him but his shot to the goalkeeper's right was palmed away for a corner kick. The resulting corner was right into the danger zone and this time the under pressure Irish 'keeper flapped at it and missed; this time Odam was on hand to force the ball home. 1-1 at last!

Three minutes of added time had the Irish permanently on the offensive and England nervously scrambling to keep them at bay. In the dying seconds a throw in was won in the right hand corner and up stepped an Irishman to launch a bullet huge throw into the box – it was touched on by a head, palmed down by the keeper and hoofed away down field as the final whistle

went. Thankfully the Irish used this tactic, which proved so devastatingly effective by the Welsh, only once in the game and right at the end.

All in all a much more encouraging performance by England, and on clear chances a game which they could have won comfortably.

The game was fantastically well organised by Plymouth SFA and Devon County FA who were nobly supported by students from the local universities and colleges. Plymouth Argyle were superb hosts to international schools football once again. On a cold and sometimes wet night the impressive and vocal 3444 attendees were entertained to an excellent game of international schoolboy soccer.

Highlights of this game filmed by BeChampions.tv can be viewed on Youtube here: [Click here](#)

