

## Northern Ireland SFA U18 3 England SFA U18 5

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Friday 11 April 2014

Played at Comber Rec FC

4<sup>th</sup> April 2014 at 5.00 pm

After an outstanding match last week against the Republic of Ireland, England tonight faced the formidable challenge of Centenary Shield holders Northern Ireland. Typical damp Irish weather was replaced by blazing sunshine for the afternoon of the game and the locals responded by packing the small Comber Rec stadium. Team manager Andy Buckingham was still without injured goalkeeper Kieron O'Hara so Tom Hadler retained his place between the uprights and Mark Onyemah started the game again as the target man in a 4-3-3 formation. Paul Braithwaite had the captain's armband and Dean Briggs was introduced into midfield. England were facing a low and very strong sun which made high balls particularly hard to judge early on in the game.

After 8 minutes a minor panic was caused by Braithwaite giving the ball away in midfield and with a 2v2 situation Northern Ireland attacked at pace, beating Tyler Lyttle only for Braithwaite to make a recovery run and steal the ball back before Adam Salley was able to line up a shot. Two minutes later Andrew White was sent to the far side of the pitch to take a free kick, leaving his left back area vacated. The free kick was poor and Gavin Whyte streaked away with the ball into the gaping space. He moved past Lyttle with ease and had no problem scoring in the bottom corner for the first goal of what was to prove an eventful and entertaining game. 0-1.

England were soon to recover the situation, however, when Braithwaite hit a long raking ball from midfield to Briggs out on the right. He made a few yards and hit a low, hard pass into the penalty box onto the trusty right foot of Brady Hickey who crashed it home for the equaliser. 1-1. Onyemah was proving a real handful for the Irish back line and after 18 minutes he shook off centre back Wilson and headed for goal only to be unceremoniously brought down by Harkin for a penalty. Andrew White brought forward his trusty left boot and scored comfortably in the bottom right corner. 2-1 to England.

The Irish were now looking rattled, unable to create many chances and forced to resort to fouls to halt England's forward progress. So it was after 22 minutes that a neat move down the left with Daniel Bruce and Onyemah resulted in a cross for Briggs who advanced towards goal only to be floored by Irish captain, Wilson just 8 yards from goal. Once again White came forward and with a carbon copy of his previous penalty put England 3-1 ahead.

Irish number 9, Adam Salley, looked a very quick and capable forward but had limited support when he broke forward. In the 31<sup>st</sup> minute he was nearly presented with a goal when a Tyler Lyttle back pass to Hadler had him juggling the ball 3 or 4 times as Salley advanced, but with England supporters' hearts in their mouths he managed to volley clear. The rest of the half was uneventful.

The second half began just as the England management team would have wanted. England had the first significant attack and won a corner on the left hand side. Briggs took it and reached the far post where Adam Curry rose like a swan to place a looping header back across goal, over the full back on the far post and into the net. 4-1 after 48 minutes.

Tom Devitt replaced Danny Haile after 58 minutes at centre back and his extra couple of inches were to prove decisive against Salley as the game progressed. Several Irish changes gave them more impetus and in the 68<sup>th</sup> minute Lowe hit a left foot volley from the edge of the area which skimmed the English bar. Ryan Charnley replaced Briggs in the 72<sup>nd</sup> minute and he joined Onyemah up front, but England were beginning to relax now and allow the Irish a little too much time on the ball and giving danger men Salley and Whyte far too much space. The inevitable happened when an attack down the left was hit across goal and struck Tyler Lyttle's arm. Despite it looking unintentional the referee awarded a penalty to Northern Ireland. Curtis Dempster stepped up and placed the kick into the middle of the goal. 4-2. This started an Irish 'charge' and England supporters were hoping that there would be no repetition of last week. Charlie Russell replaced Curry after 87 minutes and White switched to centre back with Oliver Brown Hill dropping in to left back.

Relief came in the 89<sup>th</sup> minute when Hickey knocked the ball forward for Onyemah who strolled past the tiring Lowe, rolled the ball onto his right foot and slotted it into the right of the net. This may have been the first time his right boot had touched the ball all game. 5-2 to England but the game was not over yet. With a final thrust forward the Irish whacked the ball over from the left; it bounced off Lowe, thudded against Dempster and rolled over the line for a final 5-3 score and a suitable result for a very entertaining game.

England now move to the top of the Centenary Shield table with 7 points from 3 games, but next week's visitors, Scotland, are still in with a chance of taking the title, so it is all to play for at Blackburn Rovers next Friday evening.

A delighted team manager, Andy Buckingham, was not worried about the goals scored by the opposition so long as we continue to play like that we will always score more. But he feels it is important that the boys keep their feet on the ground and not get complacent. The chairman of selectors thought it was a well-deserved victory against rugged opposition. Both are happy to be where we are in the league and looking forward to taking on Scotland.

As always the Northern Irish Schools FA proved wonderful hosts and looked after us extremely well. It was a pleasure to play at Comber Rec FC, who could not have been more welcoming,

and are to be congratulated for preparing a fine pitch and venue for the near 1500 spectators to enjoy what was another excellent example of schools football.

