

U18 Centenary Shield: England 2-1 Rep. of Ireland

Friday 27 April 2012



England boys celebrate Centenary Shield triumph last night

Life could have been so much easier for England if they had not lost their first match in Wales, because that left a very big hill to climb and having won all the other games this was the one they had still to win to secure the Centenary Shield. Were they up for the challenge, did they have the desire and the ability to tackle a more than competent Irish team? Manager, Andy Williams in charge of his country for the final time, had prepared the squad meticulously and after a spirit rousing rendition of God Save the Queen by opera singer Harriet Burns we were ready to go, well almost, as both teams then went into an interminable 'huddle' before setting up for kick off. After a very wet day the fabulous new Amex Arena in Brighton was in perfect condition and the 2800 spectators were in for a real feast of high quality football, a game that would have been a superb advert for schools football had it been televised on Sky as originally planned.

The game was open and quick right from the off as early advantage was sought but opportunities were squandered by both sides; Peter Glen-Ravenhill shooting past the post in 4 minutes after being splendidly put through by Ben Mooney and then a terrific long range cross after 6 minutes from Irish captain Colm Horgan found Daniel Morrissey whose clean and firm goal-bound header was splendidly tipped over by England 'keeper Connor Sidley-Adams. The Irish obviously saw the long cross as a route to success and they kept them coming, winning several corners in succession, but centre backs Louis Mobbs and the stylish Ollie Davies were well up for the challenge, and when called keeper Sidley-Adams was there to push balls round the post or over the bar.

Ireland were dominant during the first 20 minutes as pacey midfielder Sean Maguire switched play from side to side and put through many probing passes. He was a danger throughout the game, easily the best player on the pitch, and surely will fulfil his ambition of playing professional football in England.

After 30 minutes the Irish pressure waned and England began to break out from their defensive trench, and Tom Axford's fierce challenge on the right gave him space ahead which he followed with a cross to Glen-Ravenhill, only to see his half volley fly over the bar. England's confidence was visibly growing and after 6 or 7 clever passes in midfield Jack Pounce hit a 25 yard screamer which fizzed over the bar with the keeper well beaten. Reward came in the 34th minute when Tom Fouhy streaked past the defence on the right, crossed to Michael Sweet who calmly planted the ball into the net from 10 yards through the goalkeeper's legs. 1-0. Ireland thought they had replied after 38 minutes when Maguire fired home after a goalmouth melee, only for a foul on 'keeper Sidley-Adams to be awarded. England responded with a route 1 ball to Sweet who outpaced the defence but his resulting shot rolled past the far post. Sweet's hunger for a second goal was rewarded in the 41st minute when the Irish failed to clear cleanly from their box; Sweet won it and blasted a shot goalwards which was deflected up and over the keeper into the net. 2-0 to England.

Right on half time Ireland nearly pulled one back – a couple of rash challenges by Glen-Ravenhill got him booked and gave the Republic a free kick on the edge of the box. Maguire's shot was deflected and fell to Brian Lenihan who span and volleyed magnificently only for the ball to pass the wrong side of the bar.

The second half promised to make this a match to remember and it certainly did that. Ashleigh Artwell was sent on to shore up the centre of midfield, replacing Ben Mooney, but it was the Irish again who started fastest and soon Maguire was in the action firing past the left post after 47 minutes from 25 yards out. Tom Fouhy then broke down the right wing, opted to cross to Glen-Ravenhill rather than shoot, only for the centre-forwards 16 yard effort to pass the post once more.

The game was swinging from end to end and there always looked like more goals to come. After 60 minutes an injury to Louis Mobbs meant he had to be replaced by Louis Bruce at centre, and it seemed for the next ten minutes England froze. Ireland brought on sub Timmy Molloy, almost a replica of Maguire, into midfield and pushed the dangerous Maguire forward. These two and the magnificent crosser of the ball, Horgan, kept England under constant pressure. England had to scrap just to get a touch of the ball and from one of these encounters in midfield after 74 minutes, Ashleigh Artwell won the ball and raced through the middle, setting Fouhy free but he again opted to cross when a shot was begging, and the chance was missed.

Instant Irish pressure won yet another corner from the left and with England failing to clear it could only be Maguire on hand to drill home and pull a goal back for the Republic. 2-1.

The Irish really had their tails up now and rained crosses into the box, calling on Sidley-Adams to make several brave saves, and after 81 minutes he was able to show just what a good shot stopper he is as he made a fabulous one handed low stop when Maguire looked a certainty to score. The resulting scramble on the edge of the box had Lenihan crack a shot goalwards only for it to come back off the post.

England were relying on fast breaks on the right from Tom Fouhy as their only exit route, but these never looked like ending in goals, meanwhile the Irish poured forward. The 87th minute brought a succession of 4 corners to the Irish but they came to nought and calm returned. 5 minutes injury time was a shock to England, but an inspiration to the Irish – this being stretched even further when Axford was poleaxed and needed treatment from Dave Burns, his final act as retiring England physio. As time ran out, an unnecessary free kick was conceded 22 yards out. England packed the wall and box, Jack Doherty lined the ball up with his left foot and fired an unstoppable, Beckhamesque, kick goalwards – the crowd gasped as everyone expected to see the net bulge, but once more the bar came to the rescue, and with time up England took the match and the trophy.

This was a fabulous game, played in a superb arena (Brighton and Hove Albion couldn't have been more supportive hosts), and the Irish were magnanimous in defeat, but in reality this was one of those games where maybe the best team lost. Reflecting on that Mairead Collins, the Chairman of SAFIB, after she had presented the trophy to the home team quite rightly acknowledged that 'that's football'. After the game a delighted Andy Williams reflected; "I think we have deserved to win this season on merit. We have struck a winning formula and my players were able to consistently perform to a high standard. We kept reminding the players throughout the campaign to remain humble and level headed in enjoying their football and expressing their talent. I am so thrilled for them that their hard work and determination has been rewarded with the Championship."

After this evening's match manager, Andy Williams, goalkeeper coach, Shaun Hemming, and Physio, Dave Burns, all step down from the international arena. The ESFA owe them a great debt of gratitude for many years outstanding work and wish them every success in the future.

ENGLAND: Sidley-Adams; Axford, Newton, Mobbs, Downey; Pounce, Davies, Fouhy, Mooney; Glen-Ravenhill, Sweet. Subs: Artwell for Mooney (h/t), Bruce for Mobbs (60), Venning for Downey (73), Bunney for Glen-Ravenhill (90).

REP OF IRELAND: Comerford; Horgan, Sweeney, O'Brien, O'Donnell; Morrissey, Moffatt, Lenihan, Russell; Sheedy, Maguire. Subs: Kavanagh for O'Donnell (37), Lehane for Sheedy (ht), Molloy for Moffatt (67), Doherty for Russell (73), Matthews for Lenihan (86).

REFEREE: David Phillips (Sussex); **ASSISTANTS:** Ashley Slaughter and Carl Brook (both Sussex); **FOURTH:** Harry Lennard (Sussex).

Att: 2,822.

For more information go to www.esfa.co.uk/international

Photos and a match DVD can be purchased via www.rwt-photography.co.uk

