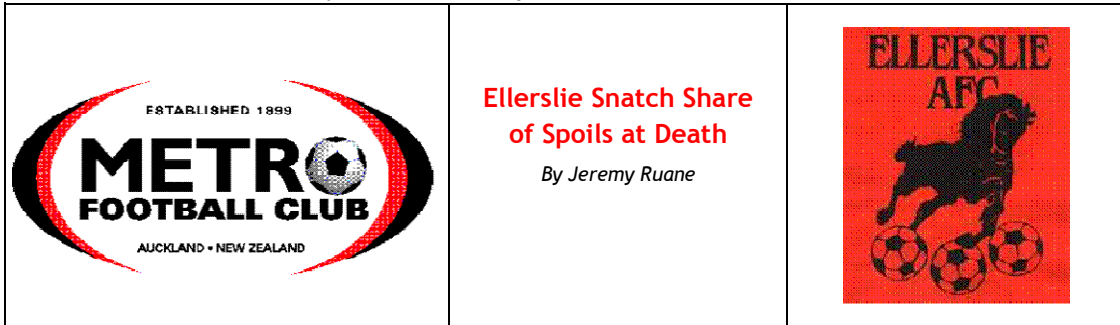


# ELLERSLIE AFC - CLASSIC MATCH

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A last-gasp equaliser from Nathan Palmer snatched a share of the spoils for Ellerslie in their Northern Premier League clash at Metro on April 23, as the first "Friday Night Football" encounter of the season at Albie Turner Field ended in a 1-1 draw.

It was very much a "get out of jail" point for the visitors, who owed much to four outstanding second half saves from Sean Dowling, as Metro looked to build on their first half advantage.

For there was only one team in the match in the first forty-five minutes, and it certainly wasn't Ellerslie! Shane Campbell was in inspired form as Metro looked to climb into an overnight fourth placing with a win from this match, involved in everything that was good about the home team's play in the first twenty minutes.

Jason Beeston's seventh minute free-kick sent the speedster scampering away down the left, and his measured cross found Peter Wild arriving on the far post. Dowling produced a fine reflex save on this occasion, and looked on seconds later as Arek Kubicki pulled a fifteen yard drive across the face of goal, Campbell having linked well with the overlapping midfielder.

The livewire number seven put the after-burners on again on the quarter-hour, Tony Goldsmith left in his wake once more. Campbell this time whipped in a low cross for Wild, who was a stride behind Daniel Martin - the Ellerslie full-back had made a fine covering run to clear the danger on this occasion.

A minute later, Bradley Newall showed some nice control on the touchline before sending that man Campbell haring through once more. This time, the resulting cross wrong-footed Wild, as Ellerslie continued to struggle against the combination of pace and the well-timed through ball.

A Beeston free-kick had Dowling in a flap in the 23rd minute, while four minutes later, the set-piece deliverer this time picked out Wild, who flicked the ball around the stranded Ellerslie custodian, only for Thomas Algie to make a timely intervention before Kubicki could pounce.

But Metro had just seconds to wait before the goal their efforts fully merited came to pass. Dylan Beckham's corner was headed down by Wild, and Newall swooped to volley home from close-range before a yellow-shirted opponent could react.

The goal seemed to stir Ellerslie into action, as they forced a corner five minutes later. But Craig Wilkins made light work of grabbing it, and launched a counter-attack with a raking clearance. Ellerslie allowed it to bounce, and Wild flicked it through for Campbell to latch onto. His volley on the turn arced over Dowling, but over the bar as well.

Ellerslie's first raid of note took 34 minutes to materialise, and saw Tim Hayhow link with Nathan Palmer on the right. The latter's cross was narrowly thumped past his own post by the retreating Beeston, who only just avoided a collision with the woodwork in his efforts to clear the danger.

It gave the visitors hope that all was not lost, and in the 42nd minute, they fired their first shot of consequence, albeit a wayward volleyed effort from Hayhow. Three minutes later, they copped a

volley of a different kind - a verbal rocket from Coach George Ritchie, sore throat notwithstanding. It was certainly deserved, for the visitors had failed to do justice to their shirts in the first forty-five minutes. But they were all fire and brimstone from the instant Steve Fletcher blew the whistle to start the second spell, and but for a fine save by Wilkins, Joel Facon would have levelled the scores within 110 seconds of the resumption, the striker having been picked out by Josh Olsen's cross to the far post.

Cameron Gray was having a game he would prefer to forget in a big hurry in Metro's defence, and it was his error which invited Hayhow to unleash a shot in the 48th minute.

Wilkins saved with his legs on this occasion, but was beaten all ends up by a dipping Gary de Klerk effort four minutes later, as Beeston cleared the ball straight to the half-time substitute. The crossbar came to Metro's rescue this time round, as the home team weathered Ellerslie's storming start to the second spell.

On the hour, the home team looked to regain the ascendancy, Richard Beeston and Campbell teaming up on the right for the latter to whip a cross across the bows of the incoming Wild.

The striker was slipped through Ellerslie's defence three minutes later by Ben Dundas, and unleashed a pile driver which Dowling managed to block. The danger wasn't over, however, as Campbell pounced on the rebound and headed the ball goal wards. How Dowling recovered from his prone position to produce the save he did defies belief!!

Hayhow pounced on another Gray error in the 67th minute, but fired wide of the mark, while Wilkins was in the thick of the visitors' forward line a minute later, as Ellerslie failed to respond to a de Klerk free-kick.

The game was shaping up for a grandstand finish, as play began to swing from end to end. But most of the moments which mattered were perpetrated by Metro. In the 73rd minute, Dowling pulled off another fine save - he couldn't have seen Wild's close-range header from a Campbell corner until the very last second.

The 'keeper was then put in an awkward spot by an under-hit pass from Goldsmith, leaving Michael Cook bearing down on the ball outside the Ellerslie penalty area. But Dowling scrambled that opportunity to safety as well.

It put the Indian sign on Cook, for when Kubicki slipped him through Ellerslie's defence eleven minutes from time, his finish in the one-on-one situation was woeful - it was Dowling's easiest save of the evening, while his next denial was unquestionably his most challenging.

After Duncan Clark had headed a Campbell corner wide, Jason Beeston sent a clearance beyond Goldsmith to the lurking Cook. This time, the substitute lobbed the advancing Dowling with a perfectly judged up-and-under.

But the 'keeper, after back-peddalling furiously, flung himself backwards to flick the ball over the crossbar - how his game has improved in the last twelve months, compared to his early nerve-wracked efforts between the sticks for East Auckland.

Six minutes from time, Dowling pulled off another fine save, similar to his previous effort, but this time thwarting an own goal, after Clark's downward header, from a Campbell corner, had cannoned skywards off an Ellerslie defender.

With time running out, and Metro wondering what it is they had to do to score a second, match-clinching goal, they were caught on the hop by a well-timed run from Palmer, and an astute chipped pass over the defensive line from Algie.

With Metro pressing forward after another Ellerslie attack broke down before the ball got near the penalty area - an all-too-frequent occurrence, it must be said - Algie pounced on the ball and lifted it over the top for Palmer to latch onto, breaching Metro's offside trap in doing so.

There are few quicker strikers in the Northern Premier League, and the speedster produced an accomplished finish, much to the delight of the Ellerslie faithful, who nearly had another goal to celebrate in stoppage time.

Facon pounced on a Richard Beeston error and hurtled into the penalty area, much like he had on an earlier rampage. On that occasion, his cross was wayward, but this time the solo option was chosen,

only for Wilkins to charge off his line and snaffle the ball to safety, thereby ensuring a point apiece from a generally entertaining, cleanly-fought and well-contested encounter.

Metro: Wilkins; R. Beeston, J. Beeston, Clark, Gray (Horne, 81); Beckham (Cook, 70), Kubicki, Dundas, Newall; Wild, Campbell

Ellerslie: Dowling; Martin, Goldsmith, Algie (booked, 69), Kelly; S. Ritchie (de Klerk, 46), Turner (M. Ritchie, 77), Olsen (Jones, 64); Palmer (booked, 78), Facon, Hayhow

Referee: Steve Fletcher