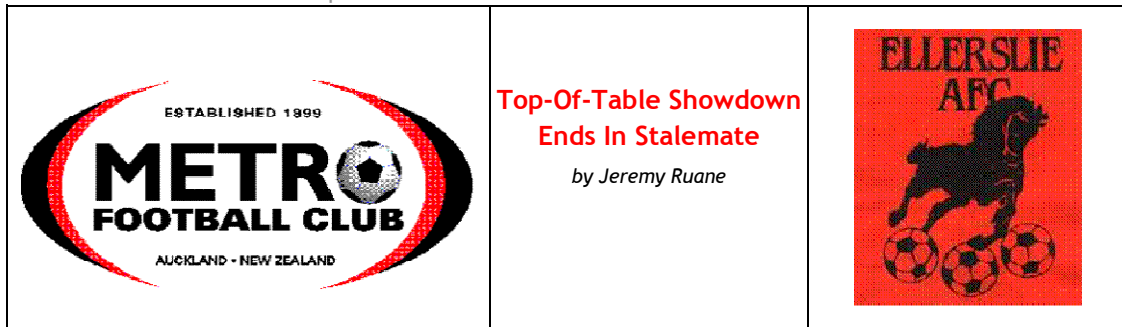


ELLERSLIE AFC - CLASSIC MATCH

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The top-of-the-table Bluebird Premier League clash between Broadway Tavern Ellerslie and Feltonmix Metro at Michaels Avenue on June 28 was as tight as tight could be - 0-0, with few chances, plenty of hard but fair challenges, and quarter neither given nor taken by two teams both with their sights set on claiming the league title.

It was always going to be a match which required the appointment of strong officials to it, so it was somewhat disappointing that, upon leaving the ground, Craig Borland, the match referee, and his two assistants, Roy Philpott and Lyn Berry, were the subject of much conversation, rather than the spectacle which unfolded around them.

It wouldn't be out of place to express the officials' performance in extremely harsh terms, but newly-elected FIFA President Sepp Blatter has told the world's soccer media to lay off referee-bashing! So while I am tempted to describe the trio's efforts as being on a par with The Marx Brothers, which was how one wag in the dugouts described their activities, I will settle for 'at times bordering on the farcical' by way of compromise!!

Which was anything but the case from the twenty-two players whom the many spectators - approaching 200 - had come along to see. After Nigel Curties had just failed to meet a Danny McHenery cross with his head in the fifth minute, Ellerslie had the better of the early exchanges, with Richard Harrison, Craig Jessep and Andrew Silver all going close, Nigel Kelly denying the second-and-third-mentioned with sound saves, as he stood in for the suspended Grant Schofield.

After weathering the home team's first half forays, Metro finished the stronger, Steve Nickson and McHenery both going close, with Malcolm Twiname's fine covering challenge denying the latter as he lined up a shot a minute before the interval.

If the first spell had seen Ellerslie ahead on points, the second half was one in which Metro had their opponents on the ropes, but were unable to deliver the knockout blow. For this, much credit is due to Grant Robertson, the Ellerslie goalkeeper, whose string of fine saves kept the first-placed side in check.

Metro's traditional second half surge started in the 54th minute, with Carl Jorgensen unleashing a screamer after inspiring a left-flank raid which resulted in a corner following the intervention of Harrison. Willie Thompson's set-piece was cleared as far as the combative midfielder, who let fly from twenty-five yards without finding the target.

Robertson's vital touch to take the ball off Nickson's head, as the striker rose to head home a cross from Neil Harlock - another Sean Hird recruit of very recent vintage - allowed the goalkeeper to send his side hurtling towards Kelly's goal on the counter-attack. Silver led the charge and as he slipped the ball through, away charged Jessep.

Whether he was level with the last defender or otherwise at the moment the ball was released is a contentious issue, but the striker who scored a hat-trick in the corresponding league fixture at Albie

Turner Field failed to take full advantage of what, up to the hour mark, had been the best goalscoring opportunity of a very tight encounter.

Back came Metro, only to be foiled by Robertson and a resolute Ellerslie defensive line. The 'keeper twice turned Harlock free-kicks to safety, while timely tackles on McHenery on two separate occasions - Dave Lewis and Doug White, take a bow - frustrated the frontrunner as he lined up shots on goal.

Robertson was active again in the 71st minute, foiling John Van Dort, then it was the turn of Nickson to be frustrated three minutes later, as the 'keeper tipped a Willie Thompson cross, destined for the striker's head, to safety. In between times, Nickson went the closest anyone was to go to scoring, rifling a close-range volley against the upright after Robertson had had difficulty dealing with a hanging Harlock cross.

The final few minutes saw Ellerslie mounting a late flurry in pursuit of a winner, with Jessep twice in on goal with just Kelly to beat. While his first effort was pulled well wide of the target, the 'keeper had to be sharp to smother the striker's shot on the turn in the dying seconds, after Gary Harrington had guided a White free-kick into his team-mate's path.

Honours even - about the right result for two well-matched sides who now meet again in three weeks with a place in the Chatham Cup semi-finals at stake. Hopefully both teams are better served by the match officials on that occasion than they were this time.