

30th August 2008

FINN MacCUHAL'S TAUPO – STILL IN WITH A CHANCE

The Finn MacCuhals Taupo football team rebounded from the previous week's loss in the best possible fashion in denying Matamata the Waikato Bay of Plenty Federation title with a gutsy 2 – 1 win there on Saturday.

Defeat would have handed Matamata the championship but the win keeps Taupo in the race although they must win their final game at home next weekend and rely on Matamata slipping up in one of their remaining two fixtures.

Coach Simon Foy retained faith in the side that had suffered the first defeat the previous weekend and ironically it was the first time all season long that he had been able to field the same starting lineup.

Saturday's victory was built on the foundations of a solid defensive effort on a cow-paddock of a pitch and in front of a boorish home crowd. The whole team stood up to plenty of intimidation from an increasingly desperate home side who were extremely lucky to finish the game with a full complement.

The home team put pressure on early but Taupo gradually took the sting out of their opponents and began to look dangerous themselves with Ben Westerman and Mark Jones dominating the middle of the park. They forced several corners and free-kicks in dangerous positions but were denied too many clearcut opportunities by a stout defensive effort from the home side.

The breakthrough came in the 31st minute from one of the many free-kicks. Ray How dropped the ball into the box and the awkward bounce led to home keeper Gary Darkes spilling it. Chris Roberts reacted quickly and was about to put the ball in the net when the big keeper hauled him down. The referee awarded the penalty but allowed the keeper to stay on the park even though the offence warranted a red card. Alan Lamb sent Darkes the wrong way with an emphatic finish from the spot.

Matamata were unable to make any impression on the game as the Taupo defence and midfield kept the shackles on and Brendon Feck playing his 150th game for Taupo had a fairly comfortable first half.

A switch to the Taupo back four during the break took a little time to sort out and Matamata began to look dangerous. Just seven minutes in they looked to have scored as their striker found space on the right and shot across the advancing Feck, but Ray How got back and made a tremendous goal-line clearance to keep the lead intact.

Some ten minutes later with Taupo back on top Darkes went down under a challenge from How at a corner and took some four minutes to recover. With a little over quarter of an hour to go Feck also was hurt in a challenge but after another long break was unable to continue, it was discovered later that he had broken ribs. Cam McGrath who was having his best game of the season, was forced to don the gloves and within two minutes, with the defence still re-organising following the keeper's demise, was beaten following a free-kick for the equalizer.

There is no denying the spirit in the Taupo side as they picked themselves up and pushed forward looking for the winner that they needed. There was still a moment of concern with eight minutes of normal time remaining. Matamata forced a rare corner and Jed Parkinson was left free to head powerfully towards goal. Jeremy Robertson defending the far post used every inch

of his height to get his head on the ball and it hit the underside of the crossbar before bouncing straight down and was subsequently cleared.

With just two minutes of normal time remaining a piece of sheer magic from Lamb won the game for the Blues. He received the ball from Jones just inside the box and turned before taking three touches in sending Parkinson one way, another defender the other way and put Darkes on the ground before toe-poking the ball home. It was an absolutely breathtaking piece of skill and a goal worthy of winning any game.

There were twelve minutes of added time played but McGrath was never tested while Darkes pulled off a great full-length save to deny Roberts and Taupo a deserved third goal.

It was a performance of real character by the entire Taupo team and they will need a similar performance in their season finale at Crown Park next Saturday against Whakatane to keep the Challenge Shield for another season and to keep the pressure for the championship on Matamata.

Team: Brendon Feck (Paul Drake 75mins), Sam Brown (Jeremy Robertson 45mins), Robbie Williams, Ray How, Cam McGrath, Jesse Smith, Ben Westerman, Mark Jones, Chris Roberts, Gaetano Dedual, Alan Lamb. Sub (not used): Steve Painter.

Other Federation League results:

Top 8: Otumoetai 2 Whakatane 0, Tauranga City Utd 3 Rotorua Utd 1.

Top Eight Table :

WAIKATO/BOP FEDERATION	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Finn MacCuhals TAUPO	19	13	5	1	56	24	44
Matamata	18	14	0	4	43	19	42
Whakatane Town	19	11	2	6	45	30	35
Tauranga City United	18	11	1	6	45	30	34
Rotorua United	18	10	0	8	50	37	30
Hamilton Wanderers	18	8	5	5	37	25	29
Claudelands Rovers	19	6	6	7	26	29	24
Otumoetai	19	6	4	9	28	32	22

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