

Limavady United 1(0) v. Loughgall 3 (1)

Bluefin Sports Championship, Saturday 23rd February, The Showgrounds.

There is still considerable doubt as to whether the United Kingdom will have left the European Union by March 29th, but after yet another home defeat for Limavady United, there is now very little doubt that by then they will have been relegated. Like Theresa May, Sean Friars will work tirelessly to the end to escape the forces ranged against him, but like the beleaguered Prime Minister, his cause is being undermined by some in his own team who lack his commitment.

Needing a win to have any chance of an unlikely escape, United ought to have been the hungrier side, but it was the visitors who were the livelier from the start. Ferris had an early close range header which he missed in the ninth minute, and within sixty seconds a ball across the box found McConnell unmarked but he contrived to put a gilt edged chance wide.

United gradually rose to the challenge, and on 16 minutes a fine move ended with a timely block taking Carlin's shot just past the post. Four minutes later good play by Duffy saw the ball reach Carlin in the box, but the cross was just behind him, and although he got a shot away it lacked power.

On 30 minutes, the game took a critical twist. A high ball into the box saw two opposing players scrap for possession, and Doherty was penalised. The award was soft, provoking intense protests, but Campbell was unfazed by the controversy and made no mistake from the spot, crisply squeezing the ball into the bottom corner. He might have had a second six minutes later, but his effort from wide on the left thudded off the base of Wells' near post. But United suffered a hammer blow two minutes later, when McClean received a second yellow card for an innocuous challenge in the middle of the field to leave his side with a mountain to climb.

The second half needed a huge improvement from United, but instead there seemed more resignation than urgency from too many players. The Villagers squandered a string of chances as United wilted under the constant pressure. First, Rea put over a great cross to Ferris, lurking unmarked in the six yard box, but he headed over. In quick succession Campbell headed wide and Gibson fired over. Then Wells spilled a difficult ball in the box, but after a scramble Campbell saw his effort cleared off the line. United were simply unable to gain any traction in the contest.

The contest was ended on 65 minutes, as a sweeping move down the right ended with substitute Hoey shooting in from a tight angle. Four minutes later an attack through the centre was not dealt with by United's defence, and the ball eventually took a deflection off Neill's weak shot and bobbed into the net. The score line was an accurate reflection of the balance of play, and had an air of inevitability about it, as United's players trudged back to the centre circle for the restart.

Loughgall took pity on their hosts, happy to keep possession, and the game meandered to a close. United pulled a goal back on 81 minutes, after good work by McCreadie played in Pomeroy, who beat two men and scored with a fine effort into the top corner from just outside the box. But this was no more than a dead cat bounce, even though it did inspire a momentary flicker of defiance, with the lanky striker missing another half chance moments later. The closest to another score was an 86th minute hanging corner which Wells had to be alert to tip out from under the bar.

The long suffering home supporters have realistic expectations and are now well inured to disappointment, and so no one imagined that their inexperienced team would not struggle, but they are less forgiving of what they identify as an apparent, if sullen, willingness to go down without even a whimper. Character is exposed by adversity, and it is unacceptable that for too much of this game it was impossible to identify which set of players was in a relegation dogfight and which was already looking ahead to the end of the season. Like Mrs. May, they are now hoping for a miracle.

Limavady United: Paul Wells, Marcus O'Kane, Ryan Doherty, Brian McClean, Emmet Friars, Hugh Carlin (c.), Ryan Logue, Aidan McCauley, Sean McCarron (Alex Pomeroy 30), Caoimhin McCallion (Ryan Devine 77), Stephen Duffy (Ryan McCreadie 66).

Substitutes not used: Connor Brown, Gareth McFadden.

Cautioned: McClean (30), McCallion (40)

Sent off: McClean (38)

Loughgall : Gareth Buchanan, Ben Neill, Jamie Rea, Lee Upton, Mark Stewart, Craig Smith, Marc McConnell, David McCullough (Conor Mullen 75), Nathaniel Ferris (Andrew Hoey 61), Jordan Gibson, Peter Campbell (Scott McCullough 75).

Cautioned: Gibson (60)

Referee: Mr. Declan Hassan (Ballymoney).

Roesider Man of the match: Hugh Carlin (inevitably).