

Nolan is Hero and Villian in League Opener



Blues players celebrate Shane Nolan's equaliser against Athlone Town at the RSC last Friday night.

League of Ireland First Division

**Waterford United 1
Athlone 1**

Shane Nolan was the central figure in this opening game of the League season at the RSC on Friday night last.

Nolan, who signed for the Blues after spending last season with Wexford Youths handed the visitors the lead just before the interval but atoned for his mistake by cracking home a magnificent equaliser deep into stoppage time.

It was a point that the home team deserved and the late strike will see them head to Wexford in good heart this weekend.

The visitors almost got off to a flying start inside the opening minute of the tie when Garbhan Coughlan picked up possession out on the left side of the area before bringing the ball onto his right-footed but his cracking effort was superbly tipped over the bar by Matthew Connor.

Athlone continued to press for the first goal with the aid of a strong breeze as Daniel Purdy did well out on the right after 12 minutes before cutting into the penalty area into his left foot but his curling effort was just wide of the Connor's far post.

Coughlan went close again to breaking the deadlock on 20 minutes when he got on the end of a Philip Hand delivery from the left but his overhead kick flashed over the bar.

The Blues created their first chance two minutes later when Shane Nolan was fouled just outside the penalty area by Athlone defender Stephen Dunne but Jack Doherty saw his resulting free kick go inches over the crossbar by Shane Cusack.

Doherty was in the thick of the action from another set piece on 29 minutes when he sent in a brilliant ball from the right after a foul on Ethan Boyle but Shane Dineen just failed to get proper contact on the ball as his effort went wide of the near post.

The visitors could have been reduced to 10 men when striker Derek Doyle put in a rather poor tackle on Dylan Mernagh just inside the Blues half but with the vocal Blues crowd looking for a red card, referee Michael O'Connor issued only a yellow card.

Athlone had another chance to go in front with five minutes remaining in the half when Michael Brown did well out on the left side to put in a cross that saw Garbhan Coughlan get in front of defender Craig Burns but his free header went wide of the left hand post.

Coughlan was gifted the night's opening goal on 43 minutes when Shane Nolan's header back to the keeper from near the halfway line was left for the striker to take full advantage as he picked up the ball before firing past the advancing Matthew Connor from 16 yards.

Anthony McAlavey was unlucky not to level the tie with a brilliant free kick five minutes into the second half when he stepped over the ball on the left side of the penalty area after Jack Doherty was brought to ground but keeper Cusack superbly turned the ball around the posts.

Shane Dineen also forced the visiting netminder into a top drawer save on 52 minutes when he turned his luck with a free kick nearly inside his own half but the ball was clawed away at the expense of a fruitless corner kick as the hosts tried to get on level terms.

Shane Cusack produced a cracking save three minutes from time when Anthony McAlavey's cross was knocked down by Patrick Fitzgerald into the path of Mikie Rowe but after his close range effort was blocked; Jack Doherty rebound was superbly tipped over the bar.

Moments later, Anthony McAlavey headed straight at Cusack in front of goal after making contact with a pass from Shane Dineen.

As the game entered the final seconds of four added minutes, Jack Doherty sent in a corner kick from the right that saw Shaun Corcoran head the ball to the edge of the penalty area. From there, Shane Nolan volleyed a left-footed shot high into the roof of the net to the sound of the final whistle. It was an extraordinary finish to a match which was played on a windswept night.

Waterford United: Matthew Connor; Dylan Mernagh, Shaun Corcoran, Craig Burns, Shane Dineen; Anthony McAlavey, Ethan Boyle, Shane Nolan, Willie John Kiely; Jack Doherty, Sean Hurley.

Substitutes: Mike Rowe for Sean Hurley (69 mins), Patrick Fitzgerald for Dylan Mernagh (70) and Bobbi Donoghue for Ethan Boyle (77).

Athlone Town: Shane Cusack; Stephen Quigley, Philip Hand, Stephen Dunne, Aidan Collins; Gavin Boyne, Daniel Purdy, Thomas Mulroney, Derek Doyle; Garbhan Coughlan, Michael Brown.

Substitute: Sam O'Connor for Derek Doyle (79 mins).

Referee: Michael O'Connor (Kildare)

Matt Keane at the RSC