

THE NEW JERSEY SOCCER GROUP

Press Release



Red Devils Hang On for Win Against Blaze
South Brunswick, NJ—June 9th, 2010



While torrential rain made conditions a little more dangerous for the New Jersey Blaze (1-4-1) and the TSC MD Red Devils (2-2-1) tonight in South Brunswick, it certainly didn't dampen the entertainment for fans braving the weather. However, it was the wrong result for the Blaze and, arguably, the game, given the run of play for most of the tie.

Keen to make amends for back-to-back defeats against the Erie Admirals (3-0) and FC Buffalo (1-1) away from home, the Blaze were looking to build on the 2-2 draw against Pocono Snow in the club's first home game at the end of last month. Head coach Rob Napier made it clear that things had to change for the team at the end of the last game in upstate New York, and the team responded accordingly in the opening 25 minutes.

Mercer Community College forward Moises Iniguez (below right) proved to be the first great threat of the game, forcing an amazing stop from Virginia Cavaliers keeper Dan Louisignau. The set piece skills of the Blaze were demonstrated well, as William Paterson's Julian Valerio followed up Iniguez's forced corner with another strike that fell just wide of the post.

Meanwhile, the back four kept the ball out of the defensive third. Local boys Kyle Saviano and captain Coron Short, alongside Cory Bachstein, kept any threats at bay, while left-back Thomas Kelly proved to be a hugely valuable asset as he led the strong side of the team with tackles, powerful throw-ins and the occasional pass into the centre of the field.

The back post was constantly manned as corners tried to pick apart the Red Devils. Valerio had another chance but was cleared off the line, while Tyler Masterson forced another stop from Louisignau. It seemed like the Blaze could not put a foot wrong, though Anthony Okodua was able to score against the run of play. Picking up a cross from the far right, he curled it around South Brunswick-born keeper Kevin Gramata.

Celebrating wildly, the Maryland striker's shot shocked the Blaze, shifting the momentum for the rest of the half. Okodua nearly made it two on the back post after a cross from the left went unpicked along the floor, while Christopher Saul and Gordon Templeman used passing and trickery to navigate around the Blaze midfield.

Okodua had his third chance of the game when another cross from Terry Akpua powered across the floor. While Okodua missed the ball, Saul did not. The half closed at 2-0, and frustrations in the Blaze camp were high.

"The two moments of madness in the first half were tough on the players, particularly the second just before the break. We had to focus on getting the fundamentals right in the break because we had a few too many mistakes when trying to develop a rhythm. We had to take the game to them and stay on the front foot, taking all of our chances."

As composure improved after a team talk, the rain worsened. While Stevenson forward Ansgar Otto used his trademark pace down the left, the ball was faster along the ground, making through balls extremely tough to latch onto. Through the air, however, it was much easier, and one such cross to second-half sub Mike Cullen was nearly converted. The left flank remained the primary route of attack against the Red Devils, as Masterson and Thomas Kelly also tried their luck on goal.

Fraternal instincts were high as Mike and Joe Cullen worked together to create the goal of the game on 67 minutes. Joe crossed the ball from right to left over the middle third and Mike, who had found lots of space, ran with the ball, curled it around the keeper and into the net.

The pressure was again on the Red Devils, as Valerio's header was cleared off the line and Kelly made a great run from the corner, cutting in and taking an excellent shot that was smothered by Louisignau. Going the other way, Howard Community College forward Ipolite Aly had two distinct chances but goalkeeping debutant Kevin Davis attacked the forward ball to dispossess the striker with great strength. The Blaze would have the final opportunity of the game, saved on the line after Valerio's cannon-like shot looked unstoppable. Despite the large amount of one-way traffic from the Blaze, they were unable to salvage a point.



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After the game, Napier was keen to stress the positives. "We caused them a lot of problems in the opening minutes of the first half despite the tough conditions. It was the same for both teams and enabled good, slick play, which worked both for and against us.

"We had some great players tonight. Mike Cullen was excellent on the left side; Masterson worked tirelessly to link things together and add that little bit of creativity. It was just a shame we couldn't put it away when we needed to."

Stefan Draganov, the Red Devils head coach, was happy with the performance and viewed it as a vast improvement on the last game. "We saw a lot of team development in our draw against Pocono and we carried it over to this tie. The team are much happier.

"The weather wasn't typical for soccer and it's always difficult to manage the players, though both teams adjusted well," he explained. "That said, we were lucky to get more goals - the Blaze were good tonight. But that's part of the game; it's great to go back with the win and I think we deserved it."

Draganov added: "We were dangerous in the first half and strong at the back. It was a real team effort and there was a lot of heart from the players. I think that's why we won the game."

"In nearly every game, our team has been much better in the second half than in the first and we need to keep ourselves consistent," Napier concluded, looking ahead to Saturday's tie against FC Reading Revolution. "We need to up our tempo and desire for the full 90 minutes and take the initiative to score first and build on it to boost confidence, instead of waiting until the pressure is on to respond."

The next game will kick off at 7:00pm in PA's Shirk Stadium, while the Red Devils have a tough home tie against the unbeaten FC Sonic (3-0) on Tuesday June 15th at Howard Community College.

The [New Jersey Blaze](#) are the central New Jersey members of the [National Premier Soccer League](#), the highest level of men's amateur soccer in the United States. They are part of the [New Jersey Soccer Group](#), a management company for a family of soccer based organizations offering a full range of soccer services in New Jersey.