SPORT ITALIA HELLENIC LEAGUE –PREMIER DIVISION
(Played on Saturday, 12th August 2006)

SWANS START WITH WIN

Two goal Haddock ensures opening day success

BICESTER TOWN 1, SLIMBRIDGE 4

Two first half goals from mid-fielder Tim Haddock after Robbie Colwell had opened the scoring, did much to give Slimbridge a comfortable three points on the opening day of the Hellenic League season. Nigel Emsden gave his side hope, when reducing the Bicester deficit to one goal mid-way through the first half, but Fred Ward's second half strike sealed the gamefor the visitors.

Bicester opened down the slope with a brisk wind in their favour and for the first five minutes held sway with good possession, but could not find a clear shot on goal.

With almost the first action in the Bicester half, Slimbridge went ahead on seven minutes. Jamie Inch made progress up the middle of the pitch and delicately chipped into the area for Colwell to turn his marker and fire home from eight yards.

Two minutes later and it was 2-0 after a John Cant corner on the left came out to Haddock on the right, to side-step an attempted tackle and drove low inside goalkeeper Jeff Simmonds' unguarded post.

It was a harsh re-introduction to Premier Division football for last season's Division One East runners-up, who bounced back after relegation in 2004/05, but these days, with the experienced Tim Fowler at the helm there is much more about them, and weathering the early disappointments, they came back with some good play. Newly signed Jody McKay, the ex-Banbury United mid-field/forward looked lively during this period and needed some watching by the Slimbridge back line, well-marshalled by skipper Leon Sterling. The Bicester efforts were rewarded when they pulled a goal back on 22 minutes. A long diagonal free-kick from the right by Dean Smith was met at the back post by the late-arriving Nigel Emsden, his firm header giving goalkeeper Adam Thomas no chance.

Slimbridge then came back strongly and one run up the right by Sterling on the overlap, saw the ball pass across the face of the home goal, with out-stretched boots just an inch or two away. Kacey Johnstone was busy with flick-ons that were causing the Bicester defence a few problems, which they did tighten up on in the second half admittedly.

Bicester striker Adam Hamp hobbled off after 34 minutes and the home attack could never find any rhythm going forward again, and when Slimbridge regained a two goal lead in first half stoppage time the game started to go away from them. Good inter-play from the right between Ward and Sterling saw the latter reach the byeline and pull back a cross to the far post wher Haddock's perfectly placed header back across Simmonds took one bounce on its way into the net.

Slimbridge dominated the second period, but a combination of stout defensive work and mixed with a little bit of luck here and there, enabled Bicester to restrict the visitors to only one more goal.

Cant flashed a low drive just past the post after Ward teed him up, and Haddock chipped onto the roof of the Bicester net from a Colwell lay-off. Sterling was unlucky when a low 'skidder' from 25 yards out came back off the post, wrong-footing attackers and back-tracking defenders alike, on 56 minutes. From a corner, Allton Axton was unlucky to get under a Haddock flick-on, but goal number four saw Inch motor forward from mid-field duties and put in Ward to hit high into the net on 62 minutes.

To their credit Bicester heads never dropped and towards the end may have won a penalty on another day. Sam Houlihan chased a ball into the Slimbridge box but was adjudged to have arrived after Goalkeeper Thomas had turned the ball away and not before! It was Houlihan again a minute before time who made time for himself to drill the ball wide of Thomas from 16 yards, but the 'keeper made a good diving block. Sandwiched between these two efforts, were a couple of very good saves from Simmonds at the other end, Colwell and substitute Barrie Dibden being denied.

The game finished with a Steve Badham run and shot that drifted wide of the goal. Badham making a return off the bench for Slimbridge after missing most of the pre-season action with a niggling thigh injury. With Haddock making the most of his competitive debut, the other debut boys, Dibden and Shayne Anson, (the latter coming off the bench late on), did their causes for the future no harm at all.

Bicester Town; J.Simmonds, L.Henderson, V.Byfield, S.Timoney, P.Spittle (A.Storton 68), A.Doyle, D.Smith, D.Bone, A.Hamp (S.Houlihan 34), J.McKay N.Emsden.

Slimbridge: Adam Thomas, L.Sterling (S.Anson 82), J.Cole, T.Haddock (B. Dibden 70), Ashley Thomas, A.Axton, E.Ward, J.Inch, K.Johnstone, R.Colwell, J.Cant (S. Badham).