

Epsom and Ewell wounded in injury time

Epsom and Ewell 1-4 AFC Whyteleafe. Combined Counties League – Premier Division South. Saturday 31st August 2024.

Although the result of this match may give the impression that we were well beaten by AFC Whyteleafe at the KGF on Saturday, this match was still in the balance as we reached the ninety minute mark, only for two injury time goals; one dreadful and the other one quite special, to confirm a 4-1 win for the visitors.

For the greater part of the match we made this a competitive contest, although we were just lacking a bit of quality that might have turned the game in our favour. On the subject of quality, former Salt Mike Hill was in the opposition line-up. I once wrote that Hill was the best player that played for us in our Step Six years and after a slow start, he began to become more influential in this Step Five encounter. What our team would give to have a player like that in Epsom colours once again. Another former Salt in the all green kit for this match was Sirak Negassi, who only left us a few weeks ago. It is interesting to see that he now makes the squad for a club sitting at the top of our division, when he wasn't deemed worthy enough to start for us that often.

We had a debut in our line up as the newly signed Kionte Gillfillian-Wual was at left back in place of the absent Ethan Nelson-Roberts. Ethan Brazier was back in the starting eleven in place of Felipe de Lima, while Axel Kodjo came in for Craig Dundas who was rested and spent ninety minutes on the bench. Up front Will Kendall remained absent and this won't be a short term situation as he is getting married in Hawaii and will be away for a few weeks! Finally, Sean Anderson came in for his first start alongside Carl Oblitey with Mohssine Sabek dropping to the bench after making his debut five days previously.

We nearly had a bizarre start to the match in the 8th minute when the AFC Whyteleafe keeper James Shaw held on to the ball too long and suddenly found himself closed down by Oblitey about a yard out from the goal line. Shaw managed somehow to get the ball out for a corner from which Ali Fofahan saw his shot go straight at the relieved keeper.

In the early part of the match it appeared that Ryan Gondoh was involved in a personal mission against our defence. He had a low shot across goal that Dan O'Donovan did well to keep out, although the ball was recycled and fed back in again, where Gondoh then saw his next shot blocked by a defender. On the 20 minute mark his shot deflected up off another of our defenders, looping over O'Donovan and coming back off our crossbar!

At the other end Anderson sent an Adam Green free kick straight at Shaw, but on the half hour Gondoh managed to ride a challenge and made for goal, only for the whistle to blow for the award of an AFC Whyteleafe free kick, which angered him. Clearly the referee should have played the advantage, but Gondoh's reaction might have earned him a sin bin on another day and I'm sure the only reason he didn't go, was because the referee recognised his error and didn't want to compound it further.

Our best chance came on the 35 minute mark when the ball went between two defenders and fell nicely for Fofahan, although he chose to take a touch when he might have been better advised to shoot straight away, and by the time he finally struck at goal he was at a wider angle and could only find the side netting from twelve yards.

We were very much in this game though, which made it even more disappointing when we conceded just before the break. With the clock showing the 43rd minute O'Donovan made a good first save, and then made another from a close range header, but we were still unable to clear the ball which was then forced in from close range by Omari Delgado. We had one more chance before the break with some good interplay between Callum Wilson and Oblitey who flicked the ball on for Axel Kodjo to strike, but again the ball was too close to Shaw who made a routine save.

At half time supporters were bemoaning the similarity of this match to some of our recent ones, in that we were as competitive as our opponents, but we seemed to find a way to concede every time. Unfortunately, a second goal then followed in the 52nd minute after Hill weaved through our defence, only to square the ball for an unmarked tap in from Delgado to score his second on the day.

Not for the first time in recent matches, we faced a mountain to climb, but our next chance came from an unlikely source as Stefan Aiwone showed great skill in the penalty area to beat a number of men and get a shot on target away, but Shaw had closed the angle down well and made the block. A couple of minutes later Oblitey intercepted a pass and set up Anderson, but his shot from just ten yards out was too close to Shaw who made the block with his feet and then also held the follow up drive from Luke Miller. This was probably our best chance of the entire match and we have to start taking these.

Next up for us was Green's clever pass to Miller, but he struck across goal, missing the far post and then having the front to blame Anderson for not getting on the end of his shot! We had a lucky escape when Hill broke through, only to fire straight at



O'Donovan and then the visitors had a shout for a penalty when the ball appeared to strike Brazier's hand at the far post, but it was clearly accidental and fortunately the referee agreed! In the 83rd minute we had a goal back, although it was a bit of a gift as Shaw kicked the ball straight out to Miller, waiting in a central position and he simply ran back in with the ball and drove his shot low past Shaw into the net, glancing off a defender's leg on the way from twelve yards.

At 2-1 down we now had something to aim for and pushed for an equaliser, but any momentum we were trying to build was obliterated by a piece of Sunday League defending as a long goal kick from Shaw was controlled in stride by the unmarked Aaron Watson and he flicked the ball past O'Donovan into his bottom left corner in the 92nd minute with our defenders nowhere. It was a horrible goal to concede, although two minutes later a rather stunning volley from twenty-five yards by Daniel Bennett flew past O'Donovan on the bounce for a fourth goal.

It seems to be a familiar story these days as we seem to be the equal of our opponents for large parts of the match, only for individual errors, or blown marking assignments to hurt us every week. We remain pointless and with two clubs going down this season we are already four points adrift of safety and have not had a clean sheet in a League match since December of last year. It was also a little strange that we only made one substitute in the entire contest at a time when something different needed to be done, even if it were only for fresh legs. These are concerning times for Salts supporters, and whilst it is still fairly early in the season, we really need to start picking up points urgently. Maybe on Tuesday at home to Chipstead?

Epsom & Ewell: Dan O'Donovan, Ethan Brazier, Kionte Gillfillian-Wual, Adam Green (c), Stefan Aiwone, Callum Wilson, Luke Miller, Axel Kodjo, Carl Oblitey, Sean Anderson, Ali Fofahan

Subs: Felipe de Lima for Kodjo (75)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk