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3rd narrow defeat in a row for Salts

4 October 2023

Epsom & Ewell 1-2 Balham. Combined Counties League – Premier Division. Tuesday 3rd October 2023.

For the third time in eight days we found ourselves involved in a competitive and fairly even contest, but in all three matches we had to accept a single goal defeat. This loss, our seventh straight defeat in the League, confirms our third worst start to a season in club history after 1963/64 (11 losses) and 1970/71 (9 losses) and although we have been getting closer, further injuries in this match may well hurt us going forward into another big match at the weekend.

James Scott made three changes to the line up against Balham; a team with whom he was previously connected. At the back it was good to see our Captain Callum Wilson back on the field, with Nick Inwugwu reverting to the bench, while up front Marlon Pinder returned in place of the absent Tino Carpene and Sirak Negassi earned a start ahead of Ade Batula who was also amongst the substitutes. However, there weren't many others in the dug out with Ash Snadden still away following his wedding, while Kevin Espinosa was also absent for this match, so Alfie Wyld our physio was the only other person there!

Equally concerning are the numbers coming through the gates right now and just 50 were present for this match, while our club chose to produce no match tweets for this contest after a woefully brief set were produced on Saturday. The club really needs to publicise itself much better. If only there was someone out there who would be prepared to help with that, and yes, I have offered!

The match started at a frenetic pace and the visitors almost took the lead in the fourth minute when a shot from their number 11 came back off the underside of our bar and was cleared to safety. Unfortunately before we faced the corner we had to make a substitution after Ayran Kugathas had hurt his hamstring making an early run and he was replaced by Jabari Ofosu-Hernandez in just the sixth minute.

In response Pinder tried his luck from thirty yards having seen the keeper off his line, but the shot lacked the requisite height and was easily gathered. However, we were the authors of our own misfortune in the 21st minute after we pushed forward on the right, but a wayward pass was intercepted and with one pass James Adebayo was through on their left and he ran in from forty yards out and slotted the ball past Harvey Keogh for the opening goal.

We were back on terms within five minutes after good work on the left between Ethan Nelson-Roberts and Sirak Negassi resulted in a deep cross over to the far side where Ofosu-Hernandez was waiting and from just outside the area he struck a piledriver which the keeper did well to parry up into the air. However, as the ball fell to earth Negassi nipped in from a very narrow angle only a couple of yards out and knocked the ball across the goal into the far side netting for the equaliser. It was our first ever goal against Balham at the third attempt.

However, just as it looked like we had gained a foothold in the match we were behind again. Literally within thirty seconds of the kick off they broke straight through on goal and Tom Read knocked the ball past the exposed Keogh to restore the Balham lead at 2-1 in the 27th minute.

The game continued at a frantic pace with both teams pressing each other and covering a large amount of ground and we had a couple of half chances, firstly when Rory Edwards struck at goal and then when Ollie Thompson met a flicked on corner at the far post, but Edwards' shot was straight at the keeper while Thompson was at full stretch and couldn't keep the header on target.

We then suffered another injury after Wilson also injured his hamstring and Inwugwu came on for him. In fact it was Inwugwu who prevented a third goal for Balham in first half injury time with a brave saving challenge which was originally awarded as a corner, before it was pointed out to the referee that our man had been fouled in the process of making the clearance and eventually the free kick was awarded! However, we were still very much in this match as the teams went off for the break.

The second half started with a great piece of skill from Negassi who left one man on his backside, before being taken out by a high challenge from their 11. On a level of 0 being ground level and 10 being Jaevon Dyer v Wick, this was at least an eight, although the official decided that a yellow card was sufficient punishment. A few minutes later a shot on our goal was deflected and Keogh was out to collect before being flattened by Adebayo and again this was one of those cases where on another day we might have seen a red card, but leniency was again the outcome as only the yellow was produced.

The visitors had a shout for a penalty in the 68th minute but it wasn't given and the resultant shot went just wide of our goal. Tijani Eshilokun came on for his debut, having featured in pre-season and showed some good touches, but the match was becoming a midfield affair with few chances. The only real chance in this period of the match came with an outrageous attempt from nearly 40 yards that caught Keogh off his line and he had to recover very quickly to just claw the ball away from his goal line for a corner.

Eshilokun was unfortunate with a low curling shot that the visiting custodian was definitely concerned about, but the ball evaded both him and his far post by a matter of inches and as time started to run out we then saw the Balham keeper drop the ball, only to be saved by the referee who saw some sort of foul in there, when there was none. Then in injury time it all boiled over in the final minutes of the match over on the touchline. It was hard to see exactly what happened but Pinder appeared to pick up a yellow card as did our Manager, along with the visitors Adebayo who then had to leave the field as it was his second of the night. However, he had already been subbed off by then so the visitors still finished the game with eleven men and after twelve minutes of added time had been played the final whistle confirmed another defeat for our

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boys.

There have been definite improvements in recent matches and there have also been a number of injuries too. None of our last three opponents could have complained had we come away with at least a point from any of these matches. However, time is running out as we approach our two most important matches of the season, against Colliers Wood United at home and Sandhurst Town away. Defeats to these two clubs will leave us well adrift of the rest of the League, and it is essential that we can have as many fit men as possible for these encounters. A bit of support would be nice too please. Come on down!

Epsom & Ewell: Harvey Keogh, Ayran Kugathas, Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Ollie Thompson ©, Zach Powell, Callum Wilson, George Owusu, Rory Edwards, Marlon Pinder, Thompson Adeyemi, Sirak Negassi

Subs: Jabari Ofosu-Hernandez for Kugathas (6), Nick Inwugwu for Wilson (35), Tijani Eshilokun for Thompson (70), Ade Batula for Owusu (76), Jaan Stanley for Negassi (81)

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