EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
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5th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

Up to £1 where sold

ISSN 2753-2771

All level after quick return

13 April 2023

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Epsom & Ewell 1-1 Mile Oak. Southern Combination League – Division One. Wednesday 12th April 2023

For the first time since 2006 we played consecutive fixtures against the same team when Mile Oak visited Fetcham Grove on Wednesday evening for their return fixture, following a disappointing goalless draw back in March. It was only the eighth time in club history that we had played both League matches on a Wednesday against the same team, and stats like that will tell you that I have very little to write about this latest encounter, a 1-1 draw!

For those who are interested this was our 101st ever League match played on a Wednesday, but it won't live long in the memory as the visitors led through a harsh looking penalty only to equalise before the half, although only rarely did we really threaten to take the lead. On another day we might have pinched the points, but ultimately both teams had to settle for just the one.

This match nearly didn't take place, due to further torrential rain and it is to the club's credit that they delayed the match inspection in the hope that the pitch was able to deal with the water in time for kick off. It is amazing how many people don't seem to understand that the weather we are facing is the worst we have seen since the 2012/13 season and sometimes you have to take a chance to get the games played.

In terms of personnel, Nick Wilson came into the starting eleven ahead of Rory Edwards, while Kevin Moreno-Gomez returned for the absent Alex Penfold and Johnny "Sonic" Akoto came in and moved Gideon Acheampong over into central defence in place of the missing Chris Boulter. Up front Athan Smith-Joseph returned after a couple of games away while Lewis Pearch moved to the bench.

We nearly scored in the opening minutes of the match when Jaan Stanley's strike was blocked, before a quick episode of pinball took place in the Oak six yard area, but the danger was cleared. Jamie Byatt then sent an Akoto cross goalwards, but the offside flag was raised and it wouldn't have counted.

In the 17th minute the visitors scored with their first attack on goal. A low left wing cross was blocked by Akoto who was adjudged to have used his arm in the process. It looked harsh, but I was a long way from the action and Marriott tucked away the penalty a minute later. We nearly produced an immediate response when Smith-Joseph sent a ball in from the left where Byatt was there to knock the ball in from close range, only to see the offside flag raised in his direction once again.

Mile Oak headed a free kick wide before Smith-Joseph dragged a shot across goal and then on the half hour Byatt was brought down on the edge of the area but Wilson sent the free kick over the bar. We were getting closer though and in the 38th minute Smith-Joseph weaved his way along the edge of the penalty area before unleashing a powerful shot that was met by a top drawer save from Stenning who was then well-placed to deny Wilson as he headed Stanley's subsequent corner goalwards.

Fortunately though we didn't have to wait much longer for the equaliser which came in the 39th minute when Stanley produced a slide rule pass across goal from the left which was met by a close range shot under Stenning from Jaevon Dyer. The final threat of the half came from a harshly awarded free kick against us, but our defensive wall did its job and we went in at the break level.

We were a little better in the second half as the visitors appeared to lack a bit of ambition. Byatt saw his header from a Stanley free kick blocked before Smith-Joseph dragged a shot across goal from a good position. However, the game began to meander and very little of note happened until Byatt lost his defender who then pulled him down from behind to earn a yellow card. Wilson's free kick was then well saved by Stenning who also made a good save to keep out Akoto's angled drive a couple of minutes later.

We then made a rash of substitutions, but this seemed to kill the momentum we had been building and although one of these, Lewis Pearch nearly earned us a penalty when he appeared to be brought down, the spot kick wasn't given and his lack of real protest told me that it had been the right decision. A couple of yellow cards for Wilson and Steve Springett followed in injury time before the match ended with the anti-climax of a 1-1 draw.

The draw is not a disastrous result and we know that two wins from our three remaining matches at home to Selsey and away at Chessington & Hook United and at Billingshurst will be enough to secure a home run in the playoffs, but we will have to play a lot better than this if we are to actually come out of those playoffs with any glory.

Oddly enough though, for all the importance of the result there was a bigger story quietly advised in the match programme which was that Leatherhead have terminated their ground share agreement with us after applying a break clause. Why we would have agreed to a clause that could leave us vulnerable to such a short notice termination is beyond me, but it would appear that we will be looking for a new ground to play at in 2023/24. This is especially problematic as any move back eastwards could end with us being moved into the Southern Counties East League if we failed to gain promotion, which I do not imagine we'd want to do. It is hoped that the club will announce something on this urgently.

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ISSN 2753-2771

Epsom & Ewell: Tom Theobald, Gideon Acheampong, Kevin Moreno-Gomez, Nick Wilson, Dylan Merchant, Johnny Akoto, Jaevon Dyer, Gavin Quintyne, Jamie Byatt, Jaan Stanley, Athan Smith-Joseph

Subs: Thompson Adeyemi for Stanley (72), Lewis Pearch for Byatt (77), Hamoud Salum for Dyer (77), Steve Springett for Moreno-Gomez (85), Theo Lukyamuzi for Smith-Joseph (90)

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