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Balham, gateway to the .... defeat

17 March 2024

Balham 2-0 Epsom & Ewell FC. Combined Counties League – Premier Division. Saturday 16th March 2024.

On Saturday we made our second visit of the season to the Mayfields Stadium and received our second defeat. Five weeks ago we were unfortunate to lose there 5-2 to AFC Croydon Athletic, but this 2-0 loss to their tenants Balham, was far more disappointing, In fact the few supporters who were there will not remember this match for very long, not even the home ones, as this was a very uninteresting encounter, full of errors and scrappy play from both sides, and even when Balham finally did break through, there was an element of a defensive contribution towards both of the goals. I felt we were deserving of a point from a goalless draw, but could have no real complaints at the end of the match.

We made three changes from our encouraging draw at Redhill seven days previously. Carl Oblitey was injured, while Reece Tierney and Callum Wilson were unavailable, so Matt McGillivray came in for his first start at the back, while Club Captain Nick Wilson returned after his two match suspension, although it was interesting to note that Ethan Nelson-Roberts retained the armband for this match, maybe because we had done well in the previous two matches, or maybe due to Wilson's excessive number of cards in recent matches. Further forward, Zach Ingham-Wright also had his first start for the club.

We kicked off slightly late after the referee took exception to Luke Miller's blue long sleeved undershirt, even though our away colours are yellow and blue. Yes, you've guessed it, he was being assessed! Officially though, I was advised that the term is now "observed" as the previous term is now seen too much as a critique of the referee. Well, my observations were that it was fortunate that no major decisions were required on this occasion, although we had a confusing early incident after our keeper Faebian Witter was blocked as he tried to drop kick the ball, yet moments later Adam Green picked up a yellow card for us, for pulling his man back. Whilst you couldn't complain about the card for our player, it was hard to see why one wasn't given for the Balham offence.

The first half contained little to write home about. Witter rushed out to claim the ball and did well to keep it inside the penalty area, despite 95% of him being outside it, while at the other end Haydn Read was alert to leave his area to head clear after Ingham-Wright had threatened to reach a Thompson Adeyemi pass. However, these were not even half-chances really, and indeed the only event of note during the first forty-five minutes came when our Secretary Spencer Mitchell was stung by a bee on the sideline. No physio was required!

We went in at the half unsurprisingly goalless and the second half started off in a worryingly similar pattern. A Jaevon Dyer header was accidentally dropped over the goal line by Read for a corner after a few minutes, but our winger was having a quiet day and was replaced by Sirak Negassi in the 52nd minute. Balham's defence had clearly done their homework and cancelled out the threat from our wings almost entirely. We were also missing the physical presence of Oblitey who had been really impressive in the last couple of matches and although Ingham-Wright was well involved in the match, he never looked likely to add to his goal from the previous week.

In fact, neither team looked like breaking through at any point, so when the home team actually opened the scoring in the 65th minute it came as a bit of a shock. A deep free kick was headed back out by Adeyemi, but he wasn't able to get a decent purchase on the next delivery back in, and inadvertently flicked it to the back post where it was volleyed back into the danger area for Jack Banks to strike the ball into the net from close range.

We then had our best chance of the match in the 70th minute when Adeyemi was brought down right on the edge of the area in a central position. The ball was placed literally one foot from the penalty area, yet the referee seemed totally happy to allow the defensive wall to congregate along the penalty spot, no more than six and a half yards away. Even when the referee had this pointed out to him he paced eight small steps back and moved the wall back about a yard! Ironically, had the wall stayed where it was originally, Adam Green's free kick might have taken a slightly larger deflection to put it out of Read's reach, but instead he was able to dive to his left to parry the ball out for what became a fruitless Epsom corner.

At this point we changed our shape. Reggie Savage and Jerry Antwi came on and we switched to three at the back, but to be brutally honest, it didn't work. From this point the home side seemed to find more space and although an overhead kick was sent well over our bar, former Salt Ash Snadden was set up for a strike from just twelve yards that was headed off the line by Wilson with Witter beaten. Moments later Witter made a good save down to his right, but the ball was recycled and a long shot from James Anderson from a central position around twenty yards out took a heavy deflection off Nelson-Roberts and bounced into the other side of the net to where Witter had been standing in the 84th minute.

Anderson picked up a late booking for clattering into Wilson in injury time, but it made no difference and Balham gave their slim hopes of a playoff place a huge boost with this win, while many others around them floundered this week.

It is difficult right now to compose a report without reference to the two teams below us, as we still need to keep looking over our shoulder to see how they got on. This will clearly continue for a while yet as Colliers Wood United and

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Sheerwater both won, making things a lot tighter at the foot of the table. I still believe 30 points will be enough to see us to safety, but while we remain on just 24, concerns remain.

Epsom & Ewell: Faebian Witter, Ayran Kugathas, Ethan Nelson-Roberts (c), Adam Green, Nick Wilson, Matt McGillivray, Luke Miller, Thompson Adeyemi, Zach Ingham-Wright, Tijani Eshilokun, Jaevon Dyer

Subs: Sirak Negassi for Dyer (52), Jerry Antwi for Eshilokun (73), Reggie Savage for Kugathas (73)

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