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# Face saved by late rally

Epsom & Ewell FC 3-4 Alton. Combined Counties League - Premier Division. Saturday 24th February.

A competitive and entertaining, if niggly encounter at the Madgwick on Saturday ended with visitors Alton scraping a win by four goals to three after a couple of late strikes from our boys gave us a hope of pinching a point right at the end. It wasn't to be though and to be honest, if we had, it would have been harsh on our opponents, who were well in control in the first half and should probably have been out of sight by the break anyway, even if the second period was more even. The fightback did at least help us with our goal difference and who knows how important that might prove to be for both teams at the end of the season.

Alton remain solid bets for one of the four playoff spots after this victory and were well on top for large periods, with one of the biggest differences between the two teams being the quality of service into the danger areas. Alton were able to get down our flanks on a regular basis and sent the ball in for the big men in the box which caused us trouble all day long, while our opportunities and in particular our set pieces were really poor in this match. However, it is impossible not to ask if things would have been different had a key flashpoint not been better dealt with, and yes, regrettably I do have to question the performance of our match officials a little after this encounter.

With many other matches called off and even with a number of travelling supporters, our attendance was advised as an extremely disappointing 68. Yes, results haven't been great, but using the club's figures we averaged 92 in the League last season (110 if you include the playoffs) while this season we average 81, despite larger away support and more local matches. Our club doesn't currently engage with the few really loyal supporters it has and our match programme doesn't even welcome them to the ground any more. The player stats within it were also wildly inaccurate and it even carried a full page advert for our "home" match this coming Tuesday, when in fact we are away! Our club recently advised on Twitter that much hard work is being done by our Committee, yet all of this "work" is apparently deemed too important to tell mere supporters what it is, while the attention to detail in the limited club output is really poor. The club actually has one fairly big story which I'm told will be announced very shortly, but even this has been an open secret on the circuit for the last three weeks!

We only made two changes from our fine win at Camberley as Rory Edwards was unavailable and was replaced by Reggie Savage, making his first start, while our goalkeeping turnstile rotated for the fifth straight week with the addition of new keeper Shay Honey who played against us for Spelthorne Sports back in October. Whilst we had five keepers in four matches almost exactly a year ago, this is the first time in club history that we have started five different ones in consecutive matches. Honey performed well on his debut and it is hoped that our Management have now found someone they are happy with between the posts, although alarmingly once again we only named four substitutes.

After a fairly even opening ten minutes we had the first strike at goal, although Savage's strike was well kept out by Lewis Mees in the Alton goal before anyone noticed that the offside flag had been raised anyway. The visitors started to gain the ascendency and opened their account in the 22nd minute with a deep corner that was met with an unmarked downwards header from close range by Ryan Stepney that Honey had no chance of keeping out. A combination of keeper and defenders blocked another chance on goal minutes later. We had an opportunity in the 27th minute after the tricky Sirak Negassi was brought down some twenty yards out, but the subsequent free kick was probably one of the worst in our history as Nick Wilson stuttered over taking it, before being replaced by regular taker Adam Green who then ballooned the strike way over the bar!

However, the next issue in this match came when Jerry Antwi picked up a facial injury on the half hour. Having seen the video of the incident it was really clear that Pat Cox raised an elbow above his head and it clattered into our player's head. The bright orange sleeved arm was really clear to see, even though the video was taken from sixty yards away, yet the referee who was much closer, didn't even award a free kick for the assault that absolutely warranted a red card. Insult was added to injury when a clearly incensed Antwi also had to be replaced by Ayran Kugathas and Wilson made his views clear, only to find himself in the sinbin as a result! The number one priority for a match official has to be the protection of the players and it wouldn't surprise me if during the injury break, the referee realised he had got this one wrong as his performance was very shaky from this point with both teams taking the opportunity to appeal for almost everything from that point onwards.

With one of our defenders off the field for ten minutes we looked very vulnerable and the only Epsom person winning a header during this period was long-serving supporter John Bonner who headed the ball back into play from the sidelines! Green was alert to clear the ball off the line from another free header that had beaten Honey, before a right wing cross was met by a superb half volley from Cox that Honey tipped over. Whilst that corner was cleared, the visitors kept up the bombardment and a left wing cross from right out on the touchline was as good as any you will ever see in the Premier League, leaving Cox the simple task of nodding the ball in at the far post from a couple of yards out in the 45th minute. Whether Cox should still have been on the field was of course extremely debateable, but in the five minutes of injury time that followed, we were grateful to Honey for making two further good stops in that time. We were very fortunate to be only two goals down at the interval.



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The second half had to be better if we were going to get back into this match, but that's exactly what happened. An early chance for Ethan Nelson-Roberts was blocked before Savage drove the rebound just wide from the edge of the area and whilst Alton had an appeal for a penalty after a header on goal struck Green's arm, it would have been extremely harsh had it been given. As we entered the 53rd minute Savage chased down a ball in midfield, winning the tackle and setting up Negassi to streak down the right wing. We were a bit short of options in the middle, so he tried to cut back onto his left foot and was brought down in the area as he did so, earning a rare and uncontested spot kick that Wilson tucked away a minute later to give us hope.

We had to make an adjustment just before the hour as Ethan Brazier limped off, and with Luke Miller coming on we had to move a few players around to accommodate. This took a little bit of time to bed in and we found ourselves being pushed back, although there was time for an Alton player to volley the ball away after it had already crossed the touchline, which as regular supporters will recall, earned our Captain Wilson a yellow card just seven days previously! However, we were grateful to Honey again as another ball in from the right was struck at goal and turned away by our debutant keeper. Unfortunately our defence had little chance in the 66th minute as we were pushing forward, but lost the ball in midfield and the counter attack was brutal, sending the ball inside the advanced Kugathas, by now playing at right back, with the square ball in being knocked in from close range by former Camberley favourite Jamie Hoppitt to make it 3-1.

Alton missed a good chance with a close range header before Wilson picked up a yellow card for a foul. Moments later someone took revenge on him, leaving him to require treatment, but the referee didn't want to know how it occurred, even ignoring an Assistant who was flagging on the far side. Then in the 80th minute Tijani Eshilokun unwisely chose to speak out to the referee after Nelson-Roberts was pulled up for a foul out on the Alton right wing and found himself having a ten minute breather as a result. As with our first half sin-bin we then conceded while short handed as the free kick was met by another close range finish, this time giving Staples his second goal of the match and giving the visitors an probably unsurmountable 4-1 lead in the 82nd minute.

Oddly enough we then produced our best ten minutes of the match and Negassi was pulled down right on the edge of the area by Archie Larkum who picked up a yellow card. Whilst the free kick from Green from wide out wasn't a very good one, it squirmed through the wall and was diverted goalwards from six yards by Wilson, completely deceiving Mees at his near post and giving us a second goal in the 87th minute. We continued to press and Negassi sent in a powerful shot from 20 yards which had a lot of swerve on it. Mees did well to parry the strike but Miller was on the loose ball in a flash and as Mees spread himself expecting Miller to strike at goal, our man held the ball up skilfully before strolling round the prostrate keeper to tap in from a couple of yards to make the score a scarcely believable 3-4!

With that goal coming in the 90th minute there were probably about seven additional minutes to play, but even with the reappearance of Eshilokun we were unable to engineer any further real chances. Instead the game continued in its niggly way and wasn't helped by some strange decisions, firstly when Kugathas was pulled back yet no card was issued, and then bizarrely when an Alton player fell to the ground in the 96th minute. Was he wasting time or genuinely injured? Well, if you are a physio, you can't take that chance and our physio Alfie Wyld came on to look after what he felt was a potential head injury, only to then receive a yellow card from the referee for entering the field of play without permission! I am certain the referee thought he was carding an opposition physio and had no idea it was our man. Either way though, our man may now think twice before rushing to help someone on the field, which is a concerning development, although pretty much summed up the day for the man in the middle and he faced a fair bit of criticism from both sides as he departed the scene moments later.

For our boys it was a much improved second half, but Alton are a very solid side who play good football and get the ball into the danger areas well and consistently. We simply couldn't afford to give them a two goal head start and hope to get away with it. We face another tricky match at Knaphill on Tuesday evening but once this match is complete, the fixture list eases significantly after a brutal February where we have played many of the top teams. Although Colliers Wood United closed the gap between us and them to four points at the foot of the table after their pivotal 2-1 win at Sheerwater, I'm seeing enough from our boys in patches to remain confident that we can stay up, although it would be nice to see a full bench again and some better club advertising and information to try and welcome more people as we enter this critical phase of the season!

Epsom & Ewell: Shay Honey, Ethan Brazier, Jerry Antwi, Adam Green, Reece Tierney, Nick Wilson (c), Sirak Negassi, Thompson Adeyemi, Reggie Savage, Tijani Eshilokun, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Ayran Kugathas for Antwi (35), Luke Miller for Brazier (56), Mekhi Savage for R.Savage (68)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk

# **Outwitted by Sidcup's set pieces**

Sidcup 45 Sutton & Epsom RFC 22. Saturday 17th February.

Sutton & Epsom RFC first played at Crescent Farm in February 1898 and it is a delight to record that modern times have not hindered this historic rivalry as the clubs met for the 21st time in the league era on Saturday afternoon. Earlier in the campaign the teams met at Rugby Lane with both clubs apologetically at the bottom of the table with a solitary success each. Sutton & Epsom came from behind to take the honours on that day. Since that November day the season has improved considerably for both clubs with the hosts arriving on the back of five straight wins. Sidcup's successful streak continued as they comprehensively and deservedly defeated S&E 45-22.

Sutton & Epsom were forced into four changes from the side that beat Gravesend with the back division incurring most of the disruption with three absentees but with the advantage of hindsight the loss of the Black & Whites' hooker probably had greater significance on the events that were to unfold. Captain Bunting started proceedings as the sides sparred in search of any early defensive frailties. The teams recycled the ball quickly, defences closed rapidly and kickers looked for open spaces and the status quo was maintained. A looping run from Sutton 10 Tom Lennard initiated the first genuine chance in the 22 but solid defensive tackling saw the ball go forward a few phases later. In contrast from a scrum on halfway Sidcup scored from their first sortie. The ball went wide and an overlap was created on the flank and Louis Keeley finished with aplomb despite a valiant effort from the diving Matt Symonds. The conversion fell short but the hosts led 5-0.

Sutton & Epsom's next chance to score was manufactured by a magnificent touchline clearance from Gareth O'Brien, being a yard or two from touch he magically threaded the ball 50 metres down the line. Though denied a stunning 50/22 the slavering chasers forced a penalty and Freddy Bunting happily accepted the points on offer for S&E to trail 3-5. As ever restarts are crucial and scrappy play saw the Black & Whites suddenly 5 metres from their own line with a scrum. Matt Whitaker carried well from a retreating pack giving Tom Lennard time to clear. Relief was temporary and punishment severe. Moments later Louis Keeley was collecting his and Sidcup's second try. On this occasion the winger left a less challenging conversion that was gratefully accepted by Tom Shea. The Crescent Farm fans warmly applauded the 12-3 lead with the first quarter nearly complete. It had become apparent that the excellent Sidcup pack had the upper hand in the set scrum. In addition Sutton were struggling with their lineout ball. Additionally and unexpectedly Freddy Bunting missed a chance to narrow the deficit as he slipped slightly on the muddy surface attempting another penalty. Then the visitors were further hampered as fullback Gareth O'Brien departed with an injured knee to be replaced by Ciaran Mohr. Once more it was a marvellous kick, this time a 50/22 by Tom Lennard that put the visitors in the opposition 22. S&E pressed for a score and were brought back for a penalty. Declining the easy three points they took the tap and Matt Whitaker celebrated his birthday with a try on the ground where he had previously recorded his 100th league try. Freddy Bunting added the extras and Sutton trailed 10-12 on the half hour.

Sutton & Epsom won a penalty at the restart as optimism rose amongst the ranks of the travelling support. Seconds later they were relieved that play was brought back for a knock on as Sidcup had intercepted and a certain try from 70 metres was denied. With half-time approaching Alex Mount received a yellow card. Not only was the Sutton scrum under pressure their front row had incurred the wrath of the referee over the technical issue of the scrums engaging. The result was a tenminute breather for Mount for the accumulated offences. Reduced to 14 Sidcup had a wonderful opportunity to make the scoreboard reflect their pack's dominance. The 14 men from Rugby Lane appeared to have navigated the choppy seas to the safe waters of half-time harbour but the Kent men scored with the final play of the half. Taking the ball blind from deep the ball-carrier stepped out of a low tackle and an overlap opportunity developed from halfway. With clinical efficiency fullback Dan Masters strode home and Tom Shea's conversion was met by the whistle that concluded the first period. The 19-10 interval lead was a fair reflection of superiority that Sidcup enjoyed in the key areas of the lineout and scrum that had provided the vital possession.

The second half began with the Black & Whites still numerically hampered and before anyone could debate if they could survive without further addition to the scoreboard Sidcup had

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their third try. Outside centre George Bird breezing through the defence to notch up their bonus point try which was effortlessly converted by Tom Shea for 26-10. Sutton showed their defiance a minute later. From a ruck on the 22 Matt Whitaker opted for the most direct route and found clear water before he evaded the last couple of defenders to score his second try. Freddy Bunting added the conversion and with that kick recorded his 200th point of the league campaign. Sutton & Epsom trailed 17-26 and hope lingered on.

It was Sidcup's turn to pin Sutton & Epsom back with a 50/22. Though S&E were now back to their full compliment the hosts immediately created a chance and how on earth they did not score will remain a mystery to all who were present. The Black & Whites cleared their lines from a 5-metre scrum but it was a temporary stay of execution. In contrast to the recently butchered offering Connor McDonald excelled with a wonderful solo effort weaving his way to the line. Though the conversion faltered with the score at 31-17 it was threatening to become a long afternoon for the visitors. That threat became a reality five minutes later. Forced back into their 22 the visitors conceded a penalty. The hosts opted for a scrum then ran wide and Connor McDonald had the ball again, with the defence desperately trying to cover men outside, he ghosted in for his second score. Tom Shea added to his account and Sidcup extended their lead to 38-17.

With 15 minutes remaining Sutton needed to carry the game to Sidcup and attempt to get something from the fixture. A fine kick return by Angus Findlay ably supported by replacements Callum Gibson and Dan Jones got S&E into the 22. There followed a Sutton try that owed more to Heath Robinson than Christopher Wren. From a central position Tom Lennard chipped ahead and the ball was not secured by the defence in the ensuing chaos the ball ended up in the right hand corner where Freddy Bunting was on hand for his first try of the season. Sutton & Epsom now had a very attainable target, the fourth try and a valuable bonus point, despite trailing 22-38.

Sutton suffered the immediate handicap of Callum Gibson becoming the second member of the front row union to get a yellow card through accumulated indiscretions. Sidcup went for the jugular only to be denied by Alex Mount's tackle under the posts forcing a spillage. The award of a 5-metre scrummage under their own posts was a mixed blessing for the Surrey men. The pack was shunted back, the posts were waving dramatically and Number 8 Nick Jansen touched down for a magnificent seventh Sidcup try. Tom Shea added the easiest of conversions for his tenth point of the afternoon as his side led 45-22.

The contest was over but there began the game within the game as Sutton went in search of their bonus point. First of all Matt Whitaker stormed to the halfway but to no avail. Then a wonderful run down the wing by Angus Findlay ended as he failed to get his pass to Ellis Rudder who was in support. The veteran Whitaker again went on the rampage and threw in a kick ahead for good measure. A penalty was kicked into the corner and the 5-metre lineout was lost. Then on the final play of the game Ellis Rudder broke clear in the 22 and passed to Matt Symonds. The rapturous cheers of the Sutton supporters turned to groans as the referee whistled for a forward pass. The game ended with Sidcup the clear winner by 45-22.

If there was a Man of the Match Award it should have gone to the Sidcup pack as they were magnificent to a man. The domination of the scrum, lineout and giving their backs front-foot ball was the telling factor in this game. Sutton & Epsom will regroup with a weekend off from the cut and thrust of league action before the visit of London Cornish on 2 nd March to Rugby Lane. For those wishing to attend please note that it will be a 3pm kick off.

Sutton & Epsom: Gareth O'Brien, Angus Findlay, Ellis Rudder, Freddy Bunting ©, Matt Symonds, Tom Lennard, Joe Lovatt, Tariq Al Khaldi, Alex Mount, Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, George London, Rob Hegarty & Matt Whitaker.

Replacements: Callum Gibson, Dan Jones & Ciaran Mohr.

Sidcup: Dan Masters; Connor McDonald, George Bird, Sam Leek, Louis Keeley, Tom Shea, Simon Vincent, Teddy Gibbons, Jonathan Fordham, Sam Carmen, Ben Stock, Steven Evans, Fred Ruff, Billy Williams & Nicholas Jansen.

Replacements: Harry Large, Tom Epps & Alex Ure.

# First win of the year for Epsom & Ewell FC

Camberley Town 1-2 Epsom & Ewell FC. Combined Counties League - Premier Division. Saturday 17th February 2024

After seven successive defeats we finally opened our account for 2024 with an extremely important 2-1 victory at Krooner Park over our old friends Camberley Town. It was our first win over our opponents in ten matches and our first in Camberley since a 2-0 win there back in 2013. Over the ninety minutes we deserved it too, with Ethan Nelson-Roberts claiming the highlights with both goals, although several players produced great performances.

In the absence of Warren Burton, Gwynne Berry took charge in the dugout and we made three changes from our defeat against Farnham Town with the injured Carl Oblitey and the unwell Toby Colwell both being unable to take part with Mekhi Savage dropping to the bench. In their places came Thompson Adeyemi and Sirak Negassi, while in goal we had Faebian Witter who had joined us from Carshalton Athletic. This meant that we were starting our fourth different goal keeper in our last four matches. For those who like their stats, this has only happened five times previously, although it did happen recently, when in January 2023 we had five different keepers in a four game span, due to a harsh sending off that left Nick Wilson between the posts at Hailsham Town!

It wasn't that long ago that we met Camberley Town at the Madgwick, where we started brightly but fell away badly to lose 5-0. While the margin of victory in this match was nowhere near as emphatic, the story was a similar one, except it was our opponents that started better with our boys that finishing the stronger of the teams this time.

Witter found himself having to tip over an early strike from Kingsley Anokye and he also made another good low block at the near post on the quarter hour mark. In response Negassi was causing a bit of trouble on the right wing originally, but switched wings with Nelson-Roberts around the 22 minute mark. He was unfortunate to see the ball bobble on him just as he was shooting, and also put another chance wide from an angle when he probably should have delivered the ball into the box and. It was easy to wonder if this would cost us when the home side took the lead shortly afterwards. With the clock showing the 35th minute we were caught out by an enormous throw from Tom Wensley that was headed past Witter from close range by Regan Hitch. It was a colossal throw in and I'm not sure if I have seen a larger throw, but he had delivered an earlier one on a similar scale, so we probably should have been aware and better prepared for this.

The fightback began almost immediately. Rory Edwards sent a shot just beyond the far post from twenty yards only moments after the goal before we started to build some good pressure. In the 44th minute Tijani Eshilokun was taken out over on the far touchline by Cavan Atkinson and whilst I was surprised that a yellow card was not awarded, we got our revenge in a different way. Adam Green's deep free kick was contested for by two Camberley players who both got a touch to the ball. Reece Tierney and Ethan Nelson-Roberts were on the end of the ball with the ball brushing the latter's right leg as it crossed the line for our 45th minute equaliser. Some people felt there was a foul on the keeper, but having seen the video back, my original view that there wasn't enough contact to cancel it out remained unchanged. More importantly, the referee agreed!

Going up the hill in the second half is often difficult against Camberley, who it should be remembered, had the better of a goalless draw with Knaphill just four days previously and had a fairly decent home record. However, we had wrestled away the momentum and the second half would prove to be a really good one to watch if you were an Epsom supporter.

Edwards was on target from twenty yards in the opening minute and whilst it was a fairly easy save for Owen Crawford, it had come from a good move and was a good start. Next to feature was our full back Jerry Antwi who beat the offside trap on the left after good work from Eshilokun and Negassi before slotting the ball back to Adeyemi who teed it up for Negassi to strike, forcing Crawford into a good low save from twelve yards in the 54th minute. However, we weren't to be denied and a minute later we had our lead. Negassi controlled a crossfield pass with a killer touch on the left, before continuing to run at goal before pulling the ball back for Eshilokun to strike from 15 yards. His shot wasn't the greatest, but it would end up counting as an assist as the ball was scuffed almost sideways and straight into the path of Nelson-Roberts who forced the loose ball in just ahead of a defender from about three yards.

For a few minutes the pattern of the game changed as we had our first lead. We either chose to sit back a little, or were pushed back as the hosts suddenly realised that they needed to "up" things a little. We had to clear the ball away from under the bar before Witter was alert to make a decent save on the hour. We also had a scare when Witter chose to clear a back pass first time and clubbed the ball straight at a home forward, but fortunately the player was unable to control it and we escaped.

We had another great chance in the 74th minute when a Green corner was met by the head of an unmarked Tierney, but the delivery required a solid thumping header and his contact wasn't the greatest and the ball went across goal. Tierney was soon in



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action at the other end as Macauley Martin ran at him, cutting back onto his right, but he went for power from about 18 yards and was well off target, dragging the shot wide of the near post.

Gradually the home side began to run out of ideas against a defence that was holding up well. Our game management was much better and even the Wensley howitzers were being dealt with by our defenders with Tierney in particular heading a few away during the second half. The game concluded in a fairly comfortable win by the end, albeit with one final funny incident just outside the Camberley penalty area, where Brad Passfield and Cavan Atkinson got involved in a spot of handbags with Eshilokun, only for the referee to bring all three players together and tell them to "grow up"!

Following the match I heard some people refer to the fact that one of our reasons for winning was that we were fitter than we had been. We certainly looked the stronger of the two teams today, particularly in the second period, but must remember it is not that long since we lost three games in a row in the closing moments, so I think there was another reason that was more relevant. I know it is a bit of a cliché, but I felt we simply wanted it more than our opponents, who had won so easily in January and thought this would be a comfortable win, particularly after conceding the opening goal. This time though, we fought back and it was good to see that for the first time in a while. Tougher challenges await us, but for now this is one of those occasions where you just have to focus on enjoying the win, as it's been a while!

Epsom & Ewell: Faebian Witter, Ethan Brazier, Jerry Antwi, Adam Green, Reece Tierney, Nick Wilson (c), Sirak Negassi, Rory Edwards, Thompson Adeyemi, Tijani Eshilokun, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Luke Miller for Negassi (82), Mekhi Savage for Nelson-Roberts

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk

# Salts defeated in presence of legend

AFC Croydon Athletic 5-2 Epsom & EwellFC. Combined Counties League - Premier Division. Saturday 10th February.

Despite scoring seven times in matches against AFC Croydon Athletic this season, we only have three defeats to show for our efforts and without sounding like a broken record, I felt we have been unlucky in all three of them! In this match, and despite the introduction of four new debutants, we gave as good as we got, only to be punished by some clinical finishing that gave the scoreline of 5-2 a hugely flattering look.

Fortunately, from a personal point of view, the disappointment on the field was eased by the presence behind the goal of our Club legend and record goal scorer **Tommy Tuite**, who scored the huge total of 391 goals for our club between 1973 and 1987. How we could do with that sort of loyalty and production right now. His attendance enabled us to talk about the good old days when we were one of the better teams in Surrey and had a ground with a welcoming atmosphere. Those days are sadly gone for now at least

Our four new starters were Conor Beattie, Alex Green and Mekhi Savage, whose father Reggie would also make his debut later on. However, any chance of us having a father and son combination on the pitch for what would be only the second time in club history would have to wait until next week, as one replaced the other! Some of you may not be aware that a large number of players have departed in the last week, hence the replacements, although it was interesting to note that the opposition Manager stated in the match programme that we had let some players go, which couldn't be further from the truth!

Either way though, the new Management Team were going to have to add some players and Savage and Green look like being useful additions to the squad, while we may have to wait a little longer to analyse Beattie's performance as he injured himself very early in the second half and was unable to continue.

Despite the bare facts that showed AFC Croydon Athletic had won their last four League matches while we had lost our last four, we started confidently and had the early share of possession. Until the fifth minute that is, when Oalekan Osideko broke away on the right and drilled a shot low at goal. Beattie was down to make the save but could only parry it back into the danger area where the Croydon goal machine Louis Theophanous was waiting to drill the shot past our by now horizontal keeper from a few yards out. It didn't seem to dent confidence too much though and Savage Junior struck low from twenty yards, requiring Toby Fisher to turn the shot wide. From the corner Thompson Adeyemi was there first, but was unable to keep the header down.

The home side headed another good chance over, although the offside flag would have cancelled any goal out, and we were back on the attack soon after. Carl Oblitey, playing against one of his former clubs, nearly scored when he was denied by a good block, with the loose ball being sent back in with interest by Green who saw the ball deflected wide. Oblitey then headed just over from



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the resultant corner. However, fortune was not going to be on our side today and on the half hour mark Osideko's shot was well saved by Beattie, only for the rebound to strike the incoming Nick Wilson, who was only able to clear the ball once it had gone over our goal line. A really unlucky way to concede, although we scored twice last season in similar circumstances. Swings and roundabouts!

Again though we responded well to the set back and within a minute we had a goal back. Ethan Nelson-Roberts fired the ball towards goal, only for his somewhat wayward strike to reach Oblitey, who controlled the ball on the edge of the area and drilled the ball low into Fisher's right hand corner. Savage then produced a good run, only for the final product to be straight at Fisher. As we went in at the half, we were very unfortunate to be 2-1 down.

The half had been in progress for a few seconds when Beattie came out to clear a long ball, but missed his kick and injured his leg in the process, requiring his replacement. Toby Colwell came on and the game continued in a similar style with Green next to have a try after some good pressure, only for his shot to go just beyond the far post from an angle. In response, the hosts struck the bar with a powerful shot from an angle, but we were asking as many of the questions, if not more than our opponents and Sirak Negassi made a good run, only to be fouled just outside the area. Regrettably though, the free kick was cleared and on the break it took two simple passes to cut our whole team out and leave Andre Coker the easiest of tap ins at the far post in the 68th minute.

With that two goal lead the home team began to grow in confidence and seven minutes later they extended their lead with a fantastic strike from Theophanous who volleyed the ball in from thirty yards with Colwell completely unable to do anything about it. Things got worse as it became 5-1 in the final minute of normal time as Theophanous drilled the ball low past Colwell from the edge of the area.

We had time to pull a goal back when substitute Rory Edwards made a good run on the right and his early low cross was guided past Fisher from six yards by Nelson-Roberts in the 94th minute, but it was barely a consolation and the final whistle blew a few minutes later with the home side victorious by five goals to two.

It wasn't all bad though; there were glimmers of hope as we performed fairly well against one of the form teams in the League who will surely make the playoffs if they continue to stay fit and healthy, in particular their striker Theophanous who was almost unstoppable. We have brought in some new players, but no defenders yet, and it is fair to say that we are going to need to strengthen in that area if we are to avoid further defeats, even if we manage to score more. Up front Oblitey looks a handful and if only we could have had a young Tuite playing alongside him, we could go into the next matches with more confidence, but up next is the Farnham juggernaut, chasing a world record, and that match looks rather daunting right now.

Epsom & Ewell: Conor Beattie, Ethan Brazier, Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Adam Green, Reece Tierney, Nick Wilson (c), Mekhi Savage, Thompson Adeyemi, Carl Oblitey, Tijani Eshilokun, Sirak Negassi

Subs: Toby Colwell for Beattie (50), Reggie Savage for M.Savage (75), Rory Edwards for Adeyemi (75), Ayran Kugathas for Negassi (83)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk

## LibDems call "Love All" for local tennis

With charges pending for using **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** tennis courts the local LibDems ask for free sport for low income players.

In a bid to bolster recreational opportunities and promote an active lifestyle within the community, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has joined forces with the **Lawn Tennis Association** (LTA) to revitalize public tennis courts across the borough.

The LTA has pledged £26,650 towards the refurbishment of a dozen tennis courts spread across key recreational areas including Auriol Park, Alexandra Recreation Ground, Court Recreation Ground, Gibraltar Recreation Ground and Poole Road Recreation Ground.

The initiative encompasses a comprehensive upgrade plan featuring state-of-the-art gate access technology, the implementation of a user-friendly online booking platform, and court enhancements geared towards ensuring top-tier facilities for local residents.

Beyond the infrastructural improvements, the partnership also promises an array of activities catered to all age groups and skill levels. Weekly complimentary tennis sessions, inclusive of equipment provision, will eliminate barriers to entry, fostering inclusivity and accessibility. Additionally, Local Tennis Leagues will host friendly competitions, promoting a sociable and active

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lifestyle within the community.

The Council will roll out a 'pay as you play' scheme across all tennis courts in the borough, slated for implementation in the coming year. The generated revenue will be reinvested to maintain and enhance the borough's tennis infrastructure, ensuring its longevity for future generations.

Cllr **John Beckett**, (RA Auriol Ward) Chair of the Environment Committee, expressed enthusiasm over the collaboration, emphasizing its significance in bolstering community well-being and fostering a culture of physical activity. He lauded the forthcoming free coaching sessions as pivotal in diversifying tennis participation across socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Julie Porter**, Chief Operating Officer at the LTA, echoed Beckett's sentiments, highlighting the project's alignment with the UK Government and LTA's Parks Tennis Project. She affirmed the commitment to providing enduring tennis facilities, thus broadening access to the sport.

In response to the impending introduction of charges for tennis court usage, Cllr **James Lawrence**, (LibDem College Ward) has launched <u>a petition</u> advocating for free access for disadvantaged groups. The petition proposes complimentary access for children during weekends and school holidays, as well as free usage for households receiving council tax support and other benefits.

The petition underscores the importance of preserving equitable access to public amenities, particularly for vulnerable segments of the population. As the council deliberates on the matter, stakeholders await a decision that balances fiscal responsibility with social inclusivity, ensuring that tennis remains an accessible pursuit for all within the community.

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# **Epsom dig deep to beat Gravesend**

Sutton & Epsom RFC 21 Gravesend 19. Saturday 3rd February.

It has reached the business end of the campaign and for all clubs a studious look at the table and the remaining fixtures will determine their aspirations. For Sutton & Epsom and Gravesend it was a fixture that would relieve relegation fears for the victor but increase anxiety for the defeated. When the clubs met earlier this season on the Rectory Field it was a match rather ruined by the referee's penchant for puritanical pedantry as the crowd endured an endless stream of penalties. Gravesend triumphed 36-29 with their clinical lineout securing multiple tries. On Saturday, with great credit to referee Kasey Allen, those present enjoyed a rousing contest unimpeded by the whistle as the Black & Whites secured their first win after a quartet of losses.

On a cloudy but mild afternoon on an excellent surface Gravesend kicked off playing towards the clubhouse. The temptation to watch England play Italy was too great for many and a rather Spartan gathering assembled. As England's plight increased so did the crowd watching the local contest. The opening five minutes of high tempo rugby with both sides attacking with gusto set the tone before the first scrummage interrupted the entertainment. The backs probed, the defences demonstrated thunderous tackling and the kickers sparred for territorial advantage. If Sutton were not wary of the Gravesend pack before the start they had an unpleasant reminder on the quarter hour mark. A penalty was conceded and the ball kicked into the corner. The lineout ball was taken cleaning. The initial surge was halted but slickly the ball was spun to the blindside where Brendan Kelly was in splendid isolation and had the easiest task to score in the corner. Fortune favoured S&E as Josh Smith's finely struck conversion came back off the upright. Gravesend led 5-0 with Sutton left to ponder discipline and penalty counts.

Any anxiety in the ranks of the Sutton supporters was instantly assuaged. The visitors cleared the restart but Gareth O'Brien and Ellis Rudder combined to run it back into the Gravesend 22 to win a penalty. It was the hosts' turn to kick into the corner for the attacking lineout. The first assault saw Freddie Bunting close to glory but an earlier infringement meant the home team had a second chance. As it has been for over a decade the go-to man was Matt Whitaker and he delivered.



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Perhaps conscious of his veteran status he arrived clean-shaven this week, though it only took days off his appearance it had not diminished his strength and footwork near the line as he powered over. Freddy Bunting's conversion put Sutton & Epsom ahead 7-5.

It was now that Gravesend winger Andrew Cooke entered the fray. His first run was rather lateral but evaded too many defenders before the ball was marshalled into touch. That was merely an appetiser to his next contribution. He gathered a clearance in his 22 in the middle of the pitch and ran the ball straight back into the Sutton 22 before being denied a sensational try. Perhaps it needed that fright to ignite the hosts. S&E now put together their best phases of the match as forwards and backs in unison swept down the pitch recycling the ball at pace. The attack ended with a penalty for a high tackle. Yet again the crowd waited to see if a 5-metre lineout would be converted into points. Once more with clinical efficiency the forwards controlled the ball and advanced to the line for lock Josh Glanville to score. Captain Bunting bisected the uprights to extend Sutton's advantage to 14-5.

The remainder of the first period was played out without further addition to the scoreboard. The indication of the first half was that this match was evenly poised with Gravesend not only dangerous through their powerful pack but carrying significantly more attacking threat in their back division than was seen in the October meeting. For S&E the lineout was functioning superbly, the set scrum had manfully met the challenge and they were playing with pace and precision. The sides turned around with all to play for with Sutton holding the upper hand 14-5.

The Rugby Lane crowd nearly had the perfect start to the second half. Centre Lawrence Elliott went from the sublime to the ridiculous. He picked the perfect angle to break the line and strode purposefully into the Gravesend 22 with a try looking probable he then threw out a pass that could generously be described as unforgiving as the bemused winger, Ellis Rudder, watched the ball speed towards the advertising hoardings. Though Sutton stole the lineout ball they could not manufacture another opening. Soon the Rugby Lane XV was to be on the defensive. A penalty in the Black & White 22 saw the visitors opt for a scrummage and as they went wide a kick through rolled against the corner flag as Sutton scrambled in defence. This started a period of relentless pressure. The hosts did not aid their cause by failing to find touch with a clearance. The Kent men were now playing their best rugby and it seemed to be a question of when rather than if they would score.

However, it was now that possibly the key factor of the fixture was becoming evident. The Sutton defence was obdurate in the extreme, to a man they tackled tenaciously and got on their feet eager to put in another hit. Almost miraculously the line held as Gravesend were frustrated time and again as they were held up over the line. Eventually the visitors scored and it took exceptional work from winger Matthew Brady twisting and turning to score in the corner with multiple tacklers in attendance. Josh Smith converted exquisitely from the touchline as they made it a two-point deficit, 12-14. Significantly it had taken ten minutes of siege warfare for the try which must have emboldened the resolve of the hosts whilst equally left the visitors asking what do we need to do to score. From the restart Gravesend were hampered by a yellow card as an instinctive outstretched arm, with no malice intended, caught Kyren Ghumra's head. The winger had to be replaced by Matt Symonds but Sutton had ten minutes to play against 14 men.

Reacting to the numerical superiority with great urgency the home team went in search of points to extend their lead beyond a solitary score. Soon they were given an opportunity. Despite being awarded a penalty very much within the capabilities of the prolific Bunting boot the captain chose to go for the corner. His bravery was rewarded as the lineout was secured and the pack advanced to the line for Chris Farrell to score. The vital conversion was added by Freddy Bunting and the 21-12 lead meant that Gravesend would have to score twice in the final quarter of an hour.

If Sutton had been under siege before their third try they now endured an all out assault from Gravesend. It was the type of rugby that has every spectator on the edge of their seat living every carry and every tackle. The previous fortitude had transformed to cussed resilience and was on the way to heroic defence. Gravesend opted for scrums but the Sutton pack refused to yield. When the ball went wide the visiting backs opted for solo glory rather than swift passing and were met by scything tackles. The longer the line held the more desperate were the attacks. If the Kent men

picked the wrong options to their great credit they did not offer up the knock-ons or penalties to assist the Sutton cause. Eventually centre Chris Brady crossed the whitewash and Josh Smith made it a two-point game once more as Sutton led 21-19. Crucially Sutton had eaten away significantly at the clock and only a couple of minutes were left.

It was now a test of game management and S&E controlled possession with admirable skill advance to the 22. On the attack they put through a speculative kick to the try line. Though it did not result in a score and gave Gravesend the ball it left the visitors with the Herculean labour of scoring from the length of the pitch. Moments later the final whistle blew and Sutton had won a victory of great significance. The manner of the success built on passion, team spirit and determination should hold them in great stead for the remainder of the campaign. For Gravesend they earned a bonus point but they put in a performance vastly superior to the earlier encounter and they certainly have all the assets required to navigate their way to safety.

There is no game next Saturday but the league continues on 17 th February with a trip to Crescent Farm to play the improving Sidcup who like S&E are on 38 points in the league but a place higher on points' difference.

Sutton & Epsom: Gareth O'Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Lawrence Elliott, Freddy Bunting ©, Ellis Rudder, Tom Lennard, Steve Munford, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell, Callum Gibson, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, George London, Rob Hegarty & Matt Whitaker.
Replacements: Tom Boaden, Tariq Al Khaldi & Matt Symonds.

Gravesend: Jamie Fautley, Andrew Cooke, Chris Brady, Josh Smith, Matt Brady, George Bruce, Ben Kite, Brendan Kelly, Terry Papworth, Jamie Forsythe, Tom Bird, Harry Brooker, Matt Hewitt, Samraj Chahal & Connor Murphy.

Replacements: Stan Dadson, Ben Reeve & Harvey Dean

Image - Robin Kennedy

# Twice led, thrice beaten....

Sheerwater 4-3 Epsom & Ewell FC. Combined Counties League - Premier Division. Saturday 3rd February.

One of the most concerning afternoons in recent club history took place on Saturday as we made our very first visit to Sheerwater's Eastwood Leisure Centre for a massive League match between the two clubs. Yet, despite the importance of the fixture, we led twice and threw the game away in the final minutes, marking the third match in a row where we have now done this as the home side claimed a 4-3 victory to record their fifth straight win against us.

For the three previous match reports between 16th and 30 January 2024 CLICK here for reports brought to us by Nathan Lambert.

We went into the match with news breaking over the previous 24 hours that we had lost regular players Jaan Stanley and Ollie Thompson who had decided to move on and I found out during the afternoon that over the last week we had also lost George Owusu, Ade Batula and Tommy Williams too. The club hasn't bothered to advise its supporters of any of these departures, or even acknowledge their contributions, leaving long suffering fans to figure things out for themselves; not for the first time as secrecy and paranoia continue to reign at our club. One glance at the FA Full Time site was enough to tell me that we have had no new registered players joining the club since Steve Springett resigned and we took the field with just four substitutes named for this hugely important contest.

In terms of personnel Harvey Keogh came back in for Toby Colwell who was one of the four subs, but this was the only change to the line up from our narrow loss to Jersey Bulls four days earlier.

Despite the backdrop to this match, we actually started very well. There were only 91 seconds on the clock when a good move down the left was laid back for Ethan Nelson-Roberts to deliver the ball into the danger area where Carl Oblitey stretched to

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guide the ball past Joe Hill from close range in the Sheerwater goal. This was a terrific way to start and whilst Louis McGrave headed over unmarked from a corner soon after our goal, the home threat would prove to be fairly limited in the final third in this opening period.

Oblitey was causing problems and it looks like Springett's final signing will be pivotal to our plight if we are to stay up. He had another chance in the seventh minute after Tijani Eshilokun intercepted a poor defensive pass and set him up, only for our striker to snatch at the ball, puling it wide from just inside the area when he had more time than he realised.

The home side had as much possession in the first half as we did and around the twenty minute mark they sent two balls fizzing straight across our six yard area in opposite directions with no one there to get the vital touch, but we looked likely to increase our lead whenever we went forward and a Nick Wilson free kick was parried by Hill with Nick Inwugwu just millimetres away from getting a touch to the ball first. Oblitey then struck wide from another Eshilokun pass before we extended our lead in the 40th minute. Luke Miller did well down the right and sent in a deep cross that had Hill scrambling. He just managed to reach the ball to claw it away, but only as far as Oblitey and although his chance was blocked, the loose ball reached Lewis Pearch who scooped the ball over the line, off a defender's leg and up into the roof of the net from inside the six yard box. There were shouts for handball from the home side, but I didn't see one, although handballs would go on to play an enormous part in the second half story.

But at the half we went in, fully deserving of the two goal lead and unaware of the disastrous second half that would follow. The hosts clearly changed things and Michael Milne and George Sellick began to cause us real difficulty. An early strike from distance wasn't an issue for Keogh, but a low shot from the right wing caused him to make a good block at the near post, only for the loose ball to be struck against the arm of Reece Tierney with a penalty being awarded. Milne tucked away the penalty in the 51st minute and the home side were on the board.

Tierney was the man penalised for the penalty against Jersey Bulls four days previously, but this one, although it did hit him on the arm, looked a bit harsh and it's not clear exactly how we could have been expected to get out of the way. Having now seen a video of the incident, I don't believe that the arm was in an unnatural position either. Either way though it was now 2-1, but not for long as a low shot in came back off our far post and as it rebounded back into play Frazier Osunkoya reacted first to knock the ball into the net from around six yards. This happened in the 53rd minute and our two goal lead had suddenly evaporated into thin air.

We responded to the setback fairly well though and Oblitey set Pearch up for a low shot that was kept out by the feet of Hill before we went ahead again on the hour mark after Miller's cross was blocked by an arm and Wilson stepped up to send the keeper the wrong way from the spot. It was another one of those decisions where in the old days the appeal would have been rejected as it was clearly ball to hand, but with these new interpretations, I don't believe anyone is completely sure of what actually constitutes a handball any more. All you could say I suppose is that the referee was consistent in his approach to both penalties and we were 3-2 up again.

Despite being given this lifeline though, we started to be pushed back with Sellick in particular giving our defenders a very difficult examination and asking the question about why he was causing so much trouble after being fairly anonymous in the opening forty-five. However, Keogh was alert to block his low shot before Sellick got through again, winning a corner after a defender got across to block his shot. A free kick was then headed over from one of his crosses while we picked up three yellow cards, one of which for Wilson, saw the home player flying up in the air as a result. Maybe it looked worse than it was, but this is the fourth match in a row with a yellow card for our Captain and he is better than that.

Sellick drilled a shot across goal before delivering another ball deep to the far post which was headed back into the danger area, only for another handball to be given against Tierney. Again, this looked harsh, but Milne put the spot kick to Keogh's right for the second time in the match and it was 3-3.

In response, Ethan Nelson-Roberts benefitted from a good "no-look" pass from Pearch but chose to shoot from an angle with Miller waiting in the middle and Hill parried the ball to safety, but for the third match in a row we conceded in the closing seconds after Milne wasn't closed down and his shot from around the edge of the area crept into the corner in the 91st minute to complete his hat trick and give Sheerwater a 4-3 lead that they wouldn't have time to relinquish.

There was still time for Milne to fall to the ground in the middle of the field, whereupon he picked up a second yellow card for apparent simulation. It was a bizarre decision from a referee who had become a little too trigger happy and incensed the home side to the extent that one of their Management was shown a red card in the "discussions" that followed the final whistle. We were no angels either as the referee was also pursued at the final whistle by our Vice-Chairman Barry Gartell, claiming vociferously that the referee didn't understand the handball law. He may well have had a point, although I'm aware that the quidelines are often changing in this respect, but it wasn't a very good look for our club.



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Our new Management team now have some significant work to do in bringing in some new players ahead of a brutal run of fixtures coming up throughout the month of February, but the manner of this defeat will also need to be questioned, along with our game Management ability as this is now three points dropped in the last three matches that may well prove costly in a relegation battle that Sheerwater showed more likelihood of escaping than we do right now.

Epsom & Ewell: Harvey Keogh, Ethan Brazier, Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Nick Inwugwu, Reece Tierney, Nick Wilson (c), Luke Miller, Thompson Adeyemi, Carl Oblitey, Tijani Eshilokun, Lewis Pearch

Subs: Sirak Negassi for Pearch (88)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk

# Three January match reports for Epsom and Ewell FC

Between 16th and 30th January **Nathan Lambert** took up the Epsom and Ewell FC match reporting responsibilities of his father Richard. Here are his three reports for your pleasure and the archives. Well done Nathan. Good job.

**Epsom & Ewell 2-4 Virginia Water**. Southern Combination Cup – Second Round. Tuesday 16th January 2024. Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk. Reporter: Nathan Lambert

### Salts frozen out by Water

On a cold evening at the Reg Madgwick stadium in Cobham, Virginia Water visited us for a Southern Combination Cup tie. The match started off well with a few good chances for both teams as in the sixth minute, Lewis Pearch was set free down the left wing and his ball into the box was headed narrowly wide by Jaan Stanley. From the resulting goal kick, Water went down the other end and put a shot from 15 yards high and wide to the right.

A few minutes later, Thompson Adeyemi ran through the opposition defence and squared a ball across for the shot to be lashed narrowly over the bar from just outside the box. Once again Virginia Water went up the other end and put a ball across the face of the goal from the left-hand side that no one could capitalize on.

After 20 minutes, both sides had decent chances and both could have scored, but it was us that took the lead in the 25th minute when a deep ball from defence found Luke Miller who got in behind the defence through the use of a nice one-two with Tijani Eshilokun. Miller finished this chance off with a great finish at the near post.

It was all downhill from here unfortunately with not much happening between this point and half time, apart from us conceding in the 44th minute with Brandon Jackson who scored for the visitors with a clinical finish into the bottom right corner.

At half time we seemed to be worth the draw but that would not stay the same into the second half as in the 52nd minute, a ball across from the left was poked into the net by Casey Boccaro from about 12 yards out. A few minutes later we made a double substitution to try and switch things up. We brought Carl Oblitey and Sirak Negassi on for Jaan Stanley and Lewis Pearch.

Debutant Oblitey, with an almost instant impact, was put through on goal by Rory Edwards after he ran through a couple of defenders and put his shot just over the bar. However soon after this we went out of the match entirely, conceding soon after from a free kick which was originally saved, but the rebound was tapped in from close range in the 72nd minute.

Ten minutes later a great back-post ball from the right wing was finished back across the goal into the far bottom corner and the visitors did not let off the pressure having two more goals ruled out for offside where balls in behind were slightly mistimed. This was not the end of the action however as substitute Sirak Negassi found himself in possession of the ball after a sliced defensive clearance to curl the ball over the keeper into the top right corner in the 90th minute.

In conclusion this was a fairly poor performance all round, as we were too open at the back, not holding the ball in midfield and we weren't creative enough in the final third but, at the end of the day it was a cup match and our main focus has to be staying up in the league this year.

Epsom & Ewell: Harvey Keogh (c), Ethan Brazier, Tommy Williams, Rory Edwards, Reece Tierney, Nick Wilson, Luke Miller, Thompson Adeyemi, Tijani Eshilokun, Jaan Stanley, Lewis Pearch

Subs: Carl Oblitey for Pearch (63), Sirak Negassi for Stanley (63), Jerry Antwi for Williams (80)

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#### Epsom & Ewell 1-2 Cobham. Combined Counties League - Premier Division. Friday 26th January 2024

#### Landlords leave it late on Friday night

Subsequent to this disappointing injury-time loss to Cobham, the threat of relegation looms large as we are six points beneath Guildford and only three ahead of Sheerwater and four ahead of Colliers Wood United. I certainly think that we need to have an improvement in form soon or we may well be headed back into step Six and possibly back to Sussex, which would be unfortunate after the work we put in to get promoted last season.

Toby Colwell came in for a rare match between the posts as Harvey Keogh was away for a few days and we started off strongly in the 4th minute where a ball in found its way to the back post where it was poked over the line following a goal-mouth scramble. Unfortunately, it was disallowed for a foul against the Cobham goalkeeper which was probably fair. Two minutes later we had another good chance after Nick Wilson found himself in some space on the edge of the box, but he drilled his shot wide.

The next piece of action at either end came in the 14th minute as Luke Miller received the ball just outside the box and put us ahead with a low, curling shot that was reached by the keeper, but not kept out. At this point I was thinking back to the last match we had played against Virginia Water, where we had gone 1-0 up fairly early with a Miller goal but had let it slip by conceding four from that point. However, this looked different as there was limited action for much of the remainder of the first half with a few saves at each end, most notably in the 34th, with a great low save by Toby Colwell that went out for a corner that led to nothing.

Three minutes later our new signing (as of last week) Carl Oblitey had a shot from roughly 20 yards that went slightly over the bar. It seemed like we were playing the better football as we were approaching half time with one Cobham chance in the 44th minute that flew over the bar from 15 yards.

At the half we probably deserved the lead. In the 51st minute, Cobham got a player through onto a one on one with our keeper that was well saved by Colwell with the follow up being blocked as well. Soon after we had a free kick that was crossed to the back post and headed narrowly wide.

Nothing much else happened for 15 minutes except for Cobham seeming to be more in control of possession. This however, would count for nothing if they couldn't create chances whilst they had most of the momentum. Unfortunately for us, they did take advantage of this period of good play with a goal in the 75th minute where a shot from Reis Stanislaus found its way across goal to Ryan Marklew who bundled it in.

At this point I could tell that it would be a matter of "when" rather than "if" as we were losing focus, losing control and we couldn't string many passes together. We tried to make a couple of substitutions to change our fortune, but Cobham piled on the pressure after a few quick restarts and got chance after chance.

A brilliant opportunity opened up for Ryan Holt in the 92nd minute as our defence didn't close him down and he was able to get his shot off to swerve which led to a corner. The corner was only half cleared and this would cost us as the ball was returned to the back post where Marklew got himself his and Cobham's second when they needed it most – three minutes over the normal time

Although there were another eight minutes after the goal for us to score in, it seemed that we were trying to punt the ball long and win the header to score but it didn't work and the game finished 2-1. I felt we were unlucky to lose but it still leaves us in a bad position, particularly if results elsewhere go badly.

Epsom & Ewell: Toby Colwell, Tommy Williams, Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Nick Inwugwu, Reece Tierney, Nick Wilson (c), Luke Miller, Thompson Adeyemi, Carl Oblitey, Tijani Eshilokun, Lewis Pearch

Subs: Jaan Stanley for Oblitey (65), Sirak Negassi for Eshilokun (80), Ethan Brazier for Williams (87)

#### Epsom & Ewell 1-2 Jersey Bulls. Combined Counties League - Premier Division. Tuesday 30th January 2024

### A late loss, again

Our fifth home match in a row provided us with a fourth consecutive loss on Tuesday as we lost in the final minutes against Jersey Bulls. Although it was a narrow loss and late in the match it still leaves us without a point for 2024 so far; form that can't continue if we want to stay up this season.

Our opponents came straight out of the gates at kick-off, putting us under some early pressure which we couldn't escape from. It

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took them just nine minutes to score with a fantastic ball into the box from near the touchline that was poked in from close range by Lorne Bickley. This was not the end of their pressure however as for the next 15 minutes we didn't get many chances at all whereas they kept on putting good balls into the box which were either missed, saved or blocked.

At this point in the half we were lucky not to be further behind, but the price of weathering the storm was just the one goal. We were starting to get a couple of chances at goal and in the 30th minute, Carl Oblitey headed a long ball down to Tijani Eshilokun who returned it to him for a shot towards goal. This shot looped up in the air, over the keeper and back into the box off the frame of the goal where Oblitey finished it back across goal at the second attempt, low to the keeper's left to make it 1-1.

It was only a few minutes later when Jersey had another chance. Their forward got through on goal but the ball bobbled away from him and he landed on the ground apparently due to a shirt pull from a defender, but the referee didn't give a pen for it.

The first half finished with two chances from Jersey, one was put over into the stand at that end and the second chance was a cross that went across the face of goal that no one could get to. At the half, we were lucky not to be behind after Jersey's early pressure, but the score was one apiece at the half.

Early into the second half, we showed a bit of bright attacking play where Luke Miller got down the right wing and put a ball across but no one was far enough upfield to capitalise and give us the lead. There was very little attacking threat from Jersey for the next 15 and even less from us as the game quietened down. However Jersey then found a second wind and was pushing forward from about the 70th minute onwards.

I was surprised that we hadn't made any substitutions by this point as we weren't looking great up top, but we waited until the 86th minute to make replacements as Jaan Stanley and Sirak Negassi came on for Lewis Pearch and Eshilokun to try and create new ideas in attack. However, three minutes later, a penalty was awarded to Jersey for an apparent handball that our defenders were certain did not hit an arm. Nevertheless, the penalty was clinically converted by Bickley into Colwell's top left corner to make it 2-1 to the visitors.

Three minutes into added time we had the final chance of the match with a free kick from about 20 yards out. Nick Wilson lined up to take it but it was parried by the keeper and the rebound was gathered. It is probably worth noting that the wall did not look like it was six yards back, let alone ten but it is not the reason we ultimately lost this match. We should have created a few more chances ourselves. At the end of the day, we could have lost the match far before that point and it still leaves us with four losses out of four for January.

Epsom & Ewell: Toby Colwell, Ethan Brazier, Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Nick Inwugwu, Reece Tierney, Nick Wilson (c), Luke Miller, Thompson Adeyemi, Carl Oblitey, Tijani Eshilokun, Lewis Pearch

Subs: Jaan Stanley for Pearch (86), Sirak Negassi for Eshilokun (86)

# The Battle of Medway lost

Medway 37 Sutton & Epsom RFC 26. Saturday 27th January. Sutton & Epsom returned to a most happy hunting ground on Saturday as their only previous trip to Priestfields saw them gain promotion in 2016 with an Andy Matthews hat trick. There were two survivors from that famous afternoon being back row brothers George London and Matt Whitaker. If nostalgia filled the air it was also because it was a red-letter day for Medway stalwart Tom Beaumont who was making his 200th league appearance. For the veteran flanker the hosts obliged with a 37-26 win in a hard fought and entertaining encounter.

Sutton saw a welcome return to Ellis Rudder, last seen four years ago at Westcliff in National 2, and Lawrence Eliott after injury breaks of vastly contrasting lengths of time. The Priestfield playing surface was in excellent condition considering the recent vagaries of the weather as Freddy Bunting kicked off on a dry but chill winter afternoon. S&E were on the attack immediately with a surging break to the opposition 22 from the prolific Matt Whitaker after the initial line break from Gareth O'Brien. An early riposte from the hosts gather the ball on the blindside on halfway with great prospects the ball inexplicably fell to earth. After this entertaining start the opening score was rather more mundane. The visitors conceded a penalty and were penalised for not retreating> The second infringement lead to a lineout in the corner. It was third time unlucky as the referee gave Owen Church-Mills the opportunity to open Medway's account. The Number 10 assuredly bisected the uprights to put Medway 3-0 up after five minutes.

Sutton & Epsom only took five minutes to not only open their account but claim the lead. Another



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Whitaker carry and support by the forwards led to a penalty. It was the hosts' turn to defend a lineout near their line. The men from Surrey secured the ball and Alex Mount was the beneficiary of their control as he forced his way over for a try. Freddy Bunting added the extras for a 7-3 advantage. Five minutes later the Black & Whites were celebrating a second try. Advancing into the 22 Freddy Bunting's probing kick behind the defence was gathered by winger Kyren Ghumra who finished with panache. Captain Bunting made it 14-3 with a relatively simple conversion. At the end of the first quarter the productive opening by the Rugby Lane XV was undone by a fatal self-inflicted wound as a woeful clearance in their 22 was predictably charged down. Medway took advantage of the retreating defence as Captain Antony Clement's perfectly timed pass gifted his centre partner, Sean Marriott, a try. Owen Church-Mills conversion made it 10-14.

The Black & Whites had a chance to reprise their opening score but Freddy Bunting overcooked the penalty and instead of a 5-metre lineout his team set up to receive a drop out. As the half continued to ebb and flow Medway were playing with great continuity and Sutton were indebted to a splendid tackle from Kyren Ghumra and an over-eager forward going off his feet at the ruck.

Medway made their first change as Deji Oyesola replaced Ryan Eastley in the front row. S&E were hampered by poor kicking from hand as two kicks in as many minutes found opponents with perfect precision who gratefully called 'mark'. As the errors mounted it was a great relief for the travelling supporters when fluency returned from the familiar source of Matt Whitaker. Gareth O'Brien and Tom Boaden continued the move that was only halted by foul play. The result was a yellow card, Medway reduced to 14 and Sutton with the penalty. The forwards took control and Chris Farrell burrowed his way over for his sides third try. Freddy Bunting's precise kick left the scoreboard reading Medway 10 Sutton & Epsom 21.

In time added on a long clearance kick unfortunately rolled through the dead ball area to the advantage of the home team. Whether you view that as careless or unlucky is up to the generosity of your spirit. However, this territorial penalty was compounded by then conceding a penalty. Owen Church-Mills stepped up to conclude the first period with his second penalty of the afternoon which took some of the gloss off the visitors first half performance but Sutton still led by 21-13 as the teams turned around.

Medway seized the initiative early in the second period. They camped in the Sutton 22 and carried relentlessly with powerful runs ably supported. However, defiant defence by Sutton averted the try that seemed imminent as a frustrated home team decided to opt for the three points at the third time of asking. Owen Church-Mills made it three out of three for penalties and his team were within a score at 16-21. It was becoming one-way traffic in the third quarter with Captain Clement at his influential best orchestrating the backs. But the stoic Sutton defence were a match for each and every carry and it was a mark of their defence that again the hosts opted for a kick at goal. It was rather a surprise when the latest strike slid wide. The despair of the home crowd was immediately replaced by a joyous cheer. The drop kick was taken by Number 8 Todd Johnson and the previously adamantine defence dissolved as he broke through a couple of tackles on his way to the 22. Then Deji Oyesola exploded through the ruck to run in untouched under the posts. The easiest of conversions was added and Medway had taken the lead 23-21.

This setback inspired Sutton who finally got some attacking ball having won a penalty at a scrum they kicked to the corner. It was the turn of the Medway defence to face the music. Willem Ratu, Freddy Bunting and the pack advanced to the line. One, two and three penalties were awarded. From the third the irrepressible Matt Whitaker added another try to his record-breaking career tally. The blustering breeze carried the conversion narrowly wide but a resurgent Sutton held a slender advantage at 26-23. Suddenly it appeared to be anyone's game with ten minutes left on the clock.

After what had gone before the denouement of the match was most disappointing for the visitors. Great credit must go to Medway who raised their game to play with urgency, accuracy and potency. They declined a kickable penalty for the lineout in the corner. This time the sustained pressure resulted in a try for lock Dan Jackson. Owen Church-Mills increased the gap to 30-26 with the game still in the balance. But the hosts were in no mood to sit back on so precarious a lead. At once they went in search of the bonus point and another try to secure the win. Ewan McTaggart

appeared to have won an important lineout steal but the he tapped back bounced cruelly away from the visitors and was gathered by the alert Kent pack. Once more the hosts burst through a ruck but this time it was an assist to Deji Oyesola who was perfectly placed to trot in under the posts for his second try of the afternoon and an impregnable 37-26 lead as Owen Church Mills made his personal tally 16 points. The hosts had no problem running down the clock to secure the 37-26 bonus point win.

It was the third game in a row that Sutton & Epsom had led in the second half but failed to hold onto their advantage. For long periods their defence was of the highest quality but unfortunately errors were punished. Medway, as they had at Rugby Lane, carried aggressively with great continuity created by timely offloads to excellent support players. Antony Clement was at his influential best whilst Todd Johnson and Deji Oyesola impressed in the pack. For S&E there was a great sense of frustration despite a try-scoring bonus point they had the chance for more. For long spells the defence was first rate but there was a sense that more than one of the scores could have been avoided. In attack the Black & Whites conversion rate in the 22 was high and four tries on the road should be the foundation for a victory. There is an urgent need to find a way of seeing out these close finishes to win matches that are in the balance.

Next Saturday Sutton and Epsom entertain Gravesend, at Rugby Lane at 2:30pm, who like the hosts and Sidcup have a 10-6 loss record in the rather congested nether regions of the league.

#### Sutton & Epsom:

Gareth O'Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Lawrence Elliott, Freddy Bunting @, Ellis Rudder, Tom Lennard, Steve Munford, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell, Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, George London, Rob Hegarty & Matt Whitaker.

Replacements: Callum Gibson, Ben Green & Willem Ratu.

#### Medway

Perry Macauley, John Sipawa, Sean Marriott, Antony Clement, Conor Chalmers, Owen Church-Mills, Ben Dance, Ryan Eastley, Josh Knight, Jack Nickalls, Dan Jackson, Jordan Stubbington, Harry Gibbons, Tom Beaumont & Todd Johnson.

Replacements: Deji Oyesola, Joseph Byrne & Robert O'Brien.

# Local rugby team not blinded by Old Alley

Sutton & Epsom RFC 15 - Old Alleynians 19. Saturday 13th January.

On Dulwich Common at the start of the league campaign the Old Alleynians won an exhilarating encounter 29-25 with a Will Malins hat trick grabbing the headlines. Both sides were much changed for the return fixture at Rugby Lane. After the Battersea Ironsides defeat Sutton and Epsom had mixed blessings from the physio hut as Tom Lennard had recovered from his back injury to make his first start at 10 but Willem Ratu's knee failed the fitness test. History repeated itself at Rugby Lane as the OAs again triumphed by four points but this time they had to come from behind to win 19-15.

On a cold but thankfully wind free afternoon Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings. Alleynians put themselves under pressure from the kick off as a forward met the kick with a technique better served for volleyball than rugby union. The unforgiving ball was spiked backwards and snatched by the Black & White pack from the retreating visitors. Encouraged by this immediate success Sutton stormed into the opposition 22 in search of the opening score. Excellent work by the forwards saw Tom Boaden carry to within a couple of strides before the ball was knocked on a couple of phases later. However, the backpedalling defence of the visitors had incurred the wrath of the referee and Sutton had the bonus of a five-metre penalty. The simple kick at goal was declined and the attacking option was chosen. Matt Whitaker rewarded the faith of his captain with a vintage score as he stepped past the first defenders before his telescopic reach stretched for the line. Freddy Bunting's conversion drifted wide but Sutton led 5-0.

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Alleynians went in search of an immediate reply and imitated the hosts by regaining the restart. The men from Dulwich eagerly went through their phases and quickly entered the 22 and looked likely to make amends for their early reverse. The determined defence of S&E managed to prevent an equalising score as the visitors spilled the ball in contact with the line at their mercy. Sutton failed to adequately clear their lines and moments later the OAs were attacking once more. Again the referee awarded a penalty to the attacking side but on this occasion the kick at goal was the more obvious option being some distance from the try-line. The attempt fell short and the Black & Whites were able to clear their lines.

Buoyed by their early success Sutton were playing with confidence and a high tempo with the halfback combination of Munford and Lennard orchestrating the attacks. The hosts were faster in thought and deed than the visitors who were struggling to find their familiar rhythm. S&E on the front foot were impressive as forwards and backs combined and they took advantage of a penalty awarded at a scrum to kick to the corner. The hosts failed to capitalise dropping the ball but a poor clearance from the subsequent scrum led to another S&E lineout on the 22. Excellent continuity was matched by robust defence lthat ed to Tom Lennard floating a kick to the corner where Ciaran Mohr under scrutiny just failed to catch the ball a metre from the line. Fortune favoured Sutton as they were awarded a free kick for foot up in the scrum. Matt Whitaker carried the ball to the line and Tom Boaden was rewarded for his support play to receive the ball and score. Freddy Bunting converted for a 121-0 lead at the end of the first quarter.

A vocal Old Alleynians XV huddled behind the posts and called upon a greater collective effort after the second try and urged the team to match the S&E team's pace at the breakdown. From the restart Number 8 Gillam Crouch caught the ball and advanced at pace into the Sutton half. From the next scrum they drove the Black & White pack off their ball. The OAs looked favourites to score but tremendous tackling not only denied them but won Sutton & Epsom a relieving penalty. The match ebbed and flowed as the clock entered time added on in the first period. OAs continued to press for a vital score and belatedly got on the scorebioard. They kicked a penalty to the corner and secured the ball at the lineout. Though the forwards were denied the ball went wide and Robert Outram chose the perfect line to carve through the defence to score. Josh Winduss added the extras as Alleynians trailed 7-14. All their good work was nearly undone as they failed to kick the ball to touch on the final play of the half and conceded a penalty for an accidental offside. Freddy Bunting failed to compound their misery as his penalty attempt went narrowly wide and Mr Richardson blew for half-time with Sutton leading 12-7.

Sutton & Epsom were the first to score in the second period. Ten minutes into the half they were awarded a penalty as the men from Dulwich strayed offside. Captain Bunting stepped up and bisected the uprights to extend Sutton's advantage to 15-7. Both sides looked threatening in attack but equally the well organised defences neutered the offensive play. As the match progressed it was Old Alleynians who began to have the majority of the possession and territory. As the match entered the final quarter S&E were indebted to Gareth O'Brien who made a superb mark in the corner that not only prevented a possible try but allowed the hosts to relieve the siege. Stubborn Sutton defence was frustrating the visitors who conceded a penalty in the hosts'

However, it was becoming one-way traffic and only a cover tackle from Ross Parsons averted a score. But the Black & Whites just could not find the comfort of the opposition half.

With ten minutes remaining after a rather scrappy sequence of rucks with each side turning over the ball Old Alleynians were awarded a scrum lees than 10 metres from the Sutton posts in a central position. From the perfect platform winger Rory Holford touched down and replacement Ollie Hobman added the conversion. S&E's lead was now by the narrowest of margins at 15-14. The visitors were in the ascendancy and pressed ahead in search of the victory. Under pressure the Rugby Lane men responded in style as they advanced to the opposition 22 with their best sequence of the half. Sadly for the home supporters, unlike the first period, they did not come away with points after their foray in the opposition 22. As the match entered time added on the Sutton defences were breached near halfway. The visitors swarmed through and Ollie Hobman scored the crucial try. Though the conversion never threatened the posts Old Alleynians had the lead for the first time in the match, 19-15, with precious few minutes remaining.

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The Black & Whites played with desperation trying to attack from deep in their half and Ben Osuntokun charged down a clearance and was only thwarted by the depth of the in-goal area from adding a fourth try. If that had been the case not only would Alleynians have secured a bonus point it would have given them an opportunity to deny Sutton a losing bonus point. In so evenly contested a match it would have been unduly harsh if the hosts had been denied the solitary point for their endeavours. Moments later the referee blew the final whistle. A keenly contested match concluded with Old Alleynians victorious 19-15 in a fixture that could have gone either way.

If the first encounter in September was entertaining fare enlivened by an excessive error count by both teams Saturday's match was of a far higher standard reflecting the improved status of both clubs. Old Alleynians gained promotion with a solitary blemish on their 2022-23 league record and are thriving at the higher level rather than struggling to acclimatise as is the case with many an elevated side. Their set piece scrummage was dominant in the first period and arguably had the upper hand throughout. Their back division has pace and quality and from the first minute they looked to play 15-man rugby. Ben Osuntokun was formidable and his ubiquitous presence became more apparent the longer the game continued. For the Black & Whites there was greater fluency and tempo in the first quarter which created the early advantage. In addition the scrambling and committed defence in their 22 frustrated their opponents. It was a match that could have gone either way but OAs finished the stronger side and at the eleventh hour broke through the Black & Whites defences for the vital score.

For Sutton & Epsom next Saturday is a rest weekend before the league campaign resumes on January 27th with the charabanc taking the team to Priestfields. In the reverse fixture an impressive Medway ran away 33-15 victors at Rugby Lane but in this league prior success appears to be almost irrelevant as a guide to form. In contrast next Saturday the Old Boys have to play their postponed fixture against Cobham. The visitors took exception to the playing surface at Dulwich Common and headed back to the Memorial Ground whilst the hosts enjoyed the afternoon watching their 3 rd XV play on the unplayable surface.

### Sutton & Epsom:

Gareth O'Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Ross Parsons, Freddy Bunting ©, Ciaran Mohr, Tom Lennard, Steve Munford, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell, Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, Rob Hegarty, Josh Pulvirenti & Matt Whitaker.

Replacements: Callum Gibson, Ben Green & Matt Symonds.

#### Old Alleynians

Josh Winduss, Tom Williams, Robert Outram, Andrew Jones-Davies, Rory Holford, Henry Dewing, Tristram Holden, Jeremiah Manning, Charles Thompson, Tom Weightman, Will Hinchcliffe, James Mair, Ben Osuntokun, Hadley Eames & Gillam Crouch.

Replacements: Cameron Saunders, Brian Lennard & Ollie Hobman.

Photo credit: Robin Kennedy