



Chips finally up for local football team

5 September 2024

Epsom and Ewell 2-0 Chipstead. Combined Counties League – Premier Division South. Tuesday 3rd September 2024

It wasn't pretty. In fact, at times it was quite attritional, but it was also a deserved first three points of the season as we defeated our former landlords Chipstead by two goals to nil at the KGF. It was also a first clean sheet in the League since 16th December as we found a way to get ahead and then showed good game management to see the match out, confirming our superiority with a late second goal.

For our boys, Toby Young came back into the starting eleven after suspension and he was joined by Craig Dundas who had been rested on Saturday. Ali Fofahan and Sean Anderson were both missing, requiring Kionte Gillfillian-Wual and Axel Kodjo to play further forward than they had against AFC Whyteleafe. Ethan Brazier kept his place on the right, meaning that Young played on the left of a back four with Callum Wilson and Stefan Aiwone partnering up in central defence.

Chipstead came into the match on the back of a win at Horley Town, although that had been only their second win of the season. This meant that this game took on extra importance as our opponents became one of the teams just above us that we needed to close the gap on, having already gone into this match four points adrift of safety at this admittedly early stage of the season. For such a big match it was a shame that only 51 people were counted as being in attendance, marking our lowest home crowd since our move here. Please do not believe the club's wildly inflated "official" attendance figure of 83. It was nowhere near that and it is really sad that they have to resort to these sort of things. Just because something is quoted by our club as "official" doesn't mean it is accurate.

The opening exchanges were mostly in favour of the visitors who made early inroads, particularly down their right wing where Young looked uncomfortable to start with playing in a less familiar position. Dan O'Donovan was called into an early save, although we had our own attack moments later with Adam Green firing just over the bar with a powerful shot that pinged off the corrugated roof at the Tolworth end of the ground and actually burst the football!

Green was involved again in the 13th minute with a free kick that Carl Oblitey headed just wide of the post and Kodjo was also not far away from 20 yards out. As we began to gain a real foothold in the match Oblitey headed wide from a Green corner before a Brazier delivery was met by a downward header from Kodjo that bounced up kindly for Sam Carman in the visitors goal to handle. Green was having one of his best games for us and saw his shot deflected wide for a corner that we were unable to take advantage of, despite Carman flapping at the ball and falling over. However, we hadn't really tested their keeper too much until Gillfillian-Wual was set up by a clever pass from Oblitey and he ran in at goal in the 39th minute, shooting from an angle, but Carman was equal to it. Another delivery from Gillfillian-Wual zipped across the Chipstead six yard area as the seconds ticked down and we went in at the break looking quite good, but without having made the break through. In fact, this was the ninth match in a row where we have failed to score in the first half!

Of course, regular readers will be aware that we have had similar situations frequently this season, failing to take advantage of them or making a crucial error at the wrong time, but this time we started the second half strongly. Young saw his header from a deep Green free kick saved by Carman at his far post, and we looked more confident. In fact, I was just about to say to supporters around me that we looked like we might score shortly, when we did exactly that in the 51st minute; a low left wing ball in from Gillfillian-Wual required Carman to stretch to reach it, but he couldn't hold on and Oblitey reacted quickly to force the loose ball over the prostrate keeper and into the roof of the net from four yards out. This was the first time we have led in a League match all season!

The visitors stepped up their efforts for a while and we found ourselves pushed back as Chipstead tried to force an equaliser. A long shot deflected kindly for O'Donovan but we had the biggest scare of the match on the hour when our keeper was unable to hold on to a fairly routine shot and the ball bobbed away from him in a similar manner to how our goal came about. However, Michael Dixon snatched at the shot from just twelve yards and fired it straight back at O'Donovan who redeemed for his error by gratefully reclaiming the ball.

This was a major let off, and maybe you would now be reading about a different ending had they levelled up the score at that point, but the miss knocked any momentum they were trying to build and there was very little of note to concern the home supporters as we began to see the game out in a fairly comfortable manner. Slowing the game down well and breaking up play almost seemed like second nature to our players, as if we did this sort of thing regularly. With ten minutes left Callum Wilson went down with cramp. I'm not sure about you, but isn't it surprising how players rarely, if ever, go down with cramp when their team are losing!

Either way, it was great to be in that sort of position after weeks of being behind in the closing stages. Wilson picked up a yellow card for a foul out on the touchline, but in the 91st minute Green's corner was flicked on by a defender to the far post where Young was waiting to volley the ball into the top corner of the net powerfully from eight yards out to confirm the destination of the points. But could we keep that first clean sheet in the League? Only just, as it turned out, as the visitors broke through in the 94th minute and rounded O'Donovan, but somehow the shot went wide of our post.

This was a determined performance from our boys in a match we really needed the points from. Some might think that describing this win as attritional isn't very fair, but actually it is a compliment. We looked much tougher to beat in this match than in recent contests and were able to see the game out in a confident manner, which is ultimately all that really matters in our current position. We now need to take this performance into our trip to Camberley on Saturday and start to build some momentum in an attempt to get away from the foot of the table. We took one step towards this last night as we leapfrogged Spelthorne Sports.

I have two further observations from this match. Firstly, we made no substitutions until the 96th minute when Luke Taylor came on for his first minutes of the new season, having only made one sub in our previous match against AFC Whyteleafe too. Although this happens from time to time, it is unusual, particularly in this era of multiple substitutions and it might indicate a lack of depth on the bench. We'll see how that develops. Secondly, it is interesting that we won our first league match in the 2023/24 season under Steve Springett with four at the back, after playing the first seven matches (all lost) with three at the back, and although this wasn't the first time this season that we have played "a four" the preferred formation appeared to involve three at the back. Maybe that will change now! In the meantime though, it was a very welcome and necessary three points.

Epsom & Ewell: Dan O'Donovan, Ethan Brazier, Toby Young, Adam Green (c), Callum Wilson, Stefan Aiwone, Luke Miller, Craig Dundas, Carl Oblitey, Axel Kodjo, Kionte Gillfillian-Wual

Subs: Luke Taylor for Dundas (96)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk