EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

26th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

Up to £1 where sold

ISSN 2753-2771

Epsom & Ewell FC knocked out by narrow loss

21 January 2025

VCD Athletic 1-0 Epsom and Ewell FC. Isuzu F.A. Vase – Fourth Round. Saturday 18th January.

After four home wins in the competition, we departed the F.A. Vase in our first away tie at high-flying VCD Athletic by a goal to nil, which on the balance of play it was hard to disagree with. However, our boys battled all the way in this match, only to be concede midway through the first half and the home side then defended that lead cleverly, showing good organisation and experience to break up the play when necessary and to keep us at arm's length from that point. As a result, the Vickers can be added to a small list of clubs alongside Eastbourne United, Hailsham Town and Long Buckby who have ended our interest in the Vase at the last 32 stage in the fifty years since we reached the inaugural final.

In terms of personnel and from looking at our bench, it looks like we are getting back to full strength, which is just as well bearing our League position and the upcoming challenges we face in that and the other two cups we remain in. Additionally, Dan O'Donovan returned between the posts after completing his suspension. Conrad Essilfie-Conduah, Ethan Nelson-Roberts and Nicolas Bostan returned to the starting eleven after our last match against Berks County, while Craig Dundas moved into a role further forward in place of the cup-tied Jason Bloor.

170 spectators were present on a chilly afternoon at Old Road and both teams opened up with half-chances. Kionte Gillfillian-Waul sent a dangerous ball into the danger area, but it was cleared, while at the other end Bostan made a good block for a corner. In the ninth minute Will Kendall was fouled close to the edge of the penalty area, and as Kendall and Ali Fofahan stood around the ball, I was surprised to see that our Captain Adam Green didn't appear to be involved, but found out soon after as Kendall tapped the ball across to him, leaving him with a more central angle for the shot, but it was blocked and the chance was gone. I appreciate the variety here, but this was a really good opportunity to test the keeper with our first set piece and it just didn't work. As it turned out, this would be the best chance we would get in the match.

We had a scare in the 14th minute when a foul by Essilfie-Conduah out wide gave the home side a chance to deliver the ball in and O'Donovan reached it at full stretch, only to then drop it at the feet of a striker. It happened too quickly for him to react though and the ball struck him and headed goalwards, where Niall Stillwell was well positioned to clear it off the goal line.

We had an opportunity on the twenty minute mark when the VCD keeper Andy Walker sent a clearance straight to Fofahan, who then found Dundas, but from twenty yards he was unable to keep his shot down. Three minutes later though, we were behind after Bostan was adjudged to have committed a foul out wide in the middle of our half, but the free kick seemed to go straight through a crowd of players and was met at the far post by Michael Fenn who smashed the ball into the net off the crossbar. I thought it had stayed out at first, but it was not to be.

This was obviously not good news. Particularly when you realise that we have only come from behind to win on one occasion this season out of the eleven wins we have registered, which took place about a mile away from this ground at Phoenix Sports back in August. This would be a real mountain to climb.

Ollie Freeman was next to try his luck with a stinging shot from close to twenty-five yards out, but O'Donovan pulled off a superb save to fingertip the ball over the bar, while our chances were of a less threatening manner. A Green corner was punched away by Walker straight to Kendall, but his shot flew over the bar from the edge of the area. On another day it might have gone in the top corner, but we were unable to punish them and Bostan had to make another great block at the other end as the home side threatened to extend their lead. We went off at the break trailing by the one goal.

An early opportunity for the hosts just missed our post before we registered our first shot on target in the 55th minute when Essilfie-Conduah's shot took a slight deflection on the way but Walker was able to make the save. We nearly had a chance just after that when Kendall's ball in from the right wing seemed destined to be met by the head of Dundas, only for the VCD Captain Ben Fitchett to get the faintest touch to it and deflect it away. Fitchett had clearly been detailed to keep an eye on our experienced midfielder and did an excellent job throughout the match.

We picked up a couple of yellow cards with Gillfillian-Waul being most upset by the decision, and then made a pair of substitutions with Carl Oblitey and Luke Miller coming on, but we were unable to create much, although we did get one more opportunity when Kendall robbed a defender and set up Essilfie-Conduah, but our man was out wide and was unable to thread the needle; the ball nestling in the side netting instead.

As the game entered the closing minutes we were indebted to O'Donovan who made a good block after a striker had broken through on the left and run in on goal. We were unable to equalise though, which was a shame as any Salts supporter who had seen our penalties in our shoot out victory over Berks County would have fancied our chances. During the last week I cautioned our club against publicising our penalties from that match online, but this was ignored, and it was interesting to see that Walker had his water bottle in the goal covered with penalty notes, and it is to be hoped that

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ISSN 2753-2771

our opponents in the two cups we remain in are not minded to look at our “official” social media channels, as for the first time in ages they might see something of relevance! VCD Athletic now have the excitement of a home tie against Hartpury University or Fareham Town in the next round, although I should point out that the previous three teams that knocked us out at this stage of the Vase went out in the last 16, so they will need to buck that particular trend!

Back in 2010/11 we departed the FA Vase at home to the favourites St Neots Town who fought back to lead us 2-1 and then promptly snuffed out the game, giving us very little to work with. This match felt a bit like that, particularly in the second half and sometimes you just have to admit that we were beaten by the better team. They will face harder challenges, but I wouldn’t be totally surprised if VCD Athletic were walking out at Wembley Stadium in a few months.

Epsom & Ewell: Dan O’Donovan, Niall Stillwell, Kionte Gillfillian-Waul, Adam Green (c), Nicolas Bostan, Callum Wilson, Ali Fofahan, Conrad Essilfie-Conduah, Will Kendall, Craig Dundas, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Luke Miller for Gillfillian-Waul (67), Carl Oblitey for Dundas (67), Jack Torbett for Kendall (90)

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