

Epsom rose from the ashes of Phoenix defeat

8 August 2024



Phoenix Sports 1-3 Epsom and Ewell FC. Emirates F.A. Cup Extra-Preliminary Round Replay - Tuesday 6th August 2024.

Well this was a strange one! With just fifteen minutes remaining, we trailed Isthmian League Phoenix Sports and the match appeared to be petering out into a 1-0 defeat, but a Carl Oblitey flick on put Will Kendall through to equalise in the 77th minute and within eight minutes he had a hat trick as our opponents fell apart in the closing stages of our 3-1 F.A. Cup win!

On a warm summer's evening in front of just over 150 spectators, even though Phoenix advised it as a suspiciously low 108, we made two changes from the eleven that had started Saturday's goalless encounter, with Oblitey coming in up front for the absent Carlos Polo-Infante and Fabio Nunes taking the place of Kenny Antony who was on the bench. This required a slight change of formation with the two strikers up front, which personally, I am a fan of.

Despite this, the match started in similar circumstances to our first meeting, with the home side edging possession in the opening ten minutes before we grew into the match. Toby Young made an excellent early block, before Ethan Nelson-Roberts crossed in a low ball to Kendall, but his shot was straight at Rob Budd in the Phoenix goal. Then we probably should have taken the lead in the 15th minute when another great cross from Nelson-Roberts was met by the unmarked Kendall at the far post, but his header back across goal was inches wide of the far post!

The home side, who had a change of Management over the close season and had given eleven debuts on Saturday were forced into an early substitution, yet somewhat against the run of play they opened the scoring in the 23rd minute when a Jack Marney corner to the far post was met by an unmarked header from Marcus Travers into the top corner of the net from close range, giving Faebian Witter no chance. This was a little harsh on our boys, but the lead was nearly extended minutes later as a free kick just missed our far post. We then had a strange incident when Witter saved a low shot, only to get up and collide with Marney in the penalty area. Both players appeared unhappy with the collision, as was the referee who chose to book the pair of them.

Witter was out again to clear smartly, while at the other end Kendall's header was on target, but was penalised for pushing. At the half, it had been a fairly even match to this stage. Clearly though our Manager Warren Burton wasn't happy and you could hear him tearing into our players at the break even from outside the dressing room!

Whether this had any effect on the players is hard to say though, as the pattern of the game didn't really change in the second half. Young set Luke Miller off down the right and his cut in and low shot was gathered by Budd at the second attempt, while Oblitey's strike from twenty yards didn't trouble him either. Maybe it was because we were behind, but it was clear that we were doing a bit more of the work as the ball started to spend more time in the Phoenix half. On the hour Kendall went up for a floated cross from Miller, although a subsequent clash of heads appeared to be accidental, and the foul awarded against Kendall seemed harsh from where I was standing.

In the 69th minute we withdrew Craig Dundas and brought Reece Tierney on at the back, which enabled Adam Green to move into the hole vacated by the former Sutton legend, but time was beginning to run out on our cup adventure. Then out of nowhere, it all changed. Kendall drilled the ball past Budd as described above and we were level out of nowhere. Within six minutes Miller cut in from the right and went down under a defender's challenge. Our winger had gone down theatrically in the first half in similar circumstances, so I wasn't expecting anything here but after a little thought, the referee awarded the penalty. It was a soft one, but we've had them awarded against us often enough before! Kendall put the ball into the top corner in the 83rd minute to give us the lead.

Whilst Budd might not have had a chance with the penalty, he will be the first to admit that our third goal was his fault as a long ball was sent forward and maybe distracted by both Kendall and a defender, he missed his clearance completely, leaving Kendall the empty net from eighteen yards in the 85th minute. It might take me some time to find out whether a hat trick in just eight minutes sets any sort of club record, but in that short time the result changed completely and we saw the game out with no further alarms.

So what actually happened here? I can only think of one similar turnaround like this in recent years, which was our very late 3-2 win over Larkfield & New Hythe back in 2021. Maybe we were fitter than the opposition and it told in the closing stages? Certainly this was something Burton was very keen on focussing on when he took over back in January, although there were no signs of a lack of fitness from Phoenix on Saturday. Maybe it was the substitution of Tierney for Dundas, but sometimes it's hard to put your finger on why we suddenly took over. Either way, we knocked out an Isthmian League club for the second successive year and won £1,125 as a result. It is now Isthmian League Hayes and Yeading United who stand in our way of a further £1,444 in prize money and we will host them at King George's Field on Saturday 17th August.



Epsom & Ewell: Faebian Witter, Toby Young, Callum Wilson, Adam Green ©, Craig Dundas, Fabio Nunes, Luke Miller, Thompson Adeyemi, Will Kendall, Carl Oblitey, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Reece Tierney for Dundas (69)

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